MISS BROWN OF X·Y·O

E·PHILLIPS·OPPENHEIM

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BY

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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MISS BROWN OF X. Y. O.

CHAPTER I

Miss Edith Brown sat on the bottommost of a short flight of steps with her back to an invisible house, gazing into an invisible world. Her left arm she had passed through the iron railing by her side; with her right hand she clutched the handle of her small Corona typewriter case. Everywhere around her was fog — fog of the orange, yellow description, choking, enveloping. For over half an hour she had been wandering about, patient and unafraid as was her habitude, but in a state of complete geographical confusion. How she had found her way into this square she had no idea, but after the hooting of cars almost in her ears, the hoarse shouts of bewildered pedestrians, the muffled turmoil of a great thoroughfare, she was very well content to sit for a few minutes in an atmosphere of peace. It was not for her to know that the quiet which she found so soothing was to be the prelude to storms such as she had never dreamed of, to days of breathless living, to vivid patches of romance, to journeyings in a new and terrifying world. Probably if she could have seen into the closely curtained room a few yards behind her, which she was presently to enter, she would have picked up her neatly packed typewriter and rushed out into the gulf of unsavoury darkness, careless of where she went or how. Or again — perhaps not. Miss Brown, notwithstanding her demure appearance, had suffered all her life from an unprobed spirit of romance.

She sat deliberating upon her whereabouts. The roar in her ears must come, she fancied, from Kensington High Street, the thoroughfare which she had recently quitted,

and she must have found her way into one of those secluded and opulent squares lying to the southeast of it. Presently, she decided, she would make another effort towards getting a little nearer to her rooms in Shepherd's Market, by seeking one of the tubes in the vicinity. Whilst she was making up her mind to start, however, the front door behind her opened, a man groped his way down the steps, and just avoided falling over her. Even in his surprise, he showed the restraint of his class.

"I beg your pardon," he said quietly. "I didn't see that any one was there."

"I hope I'm not a nuisance," she ventured. "I lost my way in the fog and I was trying to think out where I was."

"You are quite welcome to sit there, madam," he assured her.

He was on the point of passing on, when he was suddenly attracted by the sight of the square case she was carrying. He stooped down and looked at it more closely. His face was so near now that it almost touched hers, — the smooth face of the "gentleman's servant," with neat collar and black tie. There was something about his expression, however, which denoted underneath the calm exterior a ferment within.

"Is that a typewriter?" he asked quickly.

"It is," she answered.

"You're not a typist by any chance, Miss?" he asked again, with a queer note of eagerness in his tone.

"I am," she admitted. "I have been out doing some work in Kensington, and I am trying to find my way home."

He leaned over until she was almost afraid. He seemed to be studying her face hungrily. It was an honest face, not without attraction even in that drab background. The man drew a little breath. There was a certain thickness about his speech as though he had been running.

"Will you do some work for a gentleman inside — important work?"

"Certainly," she assented, welcoming the idea of even a temporary shelter.

"I was going out to try to discover a typewriting office," he explained. "It is a strange thing that I should find you sitting there. Come in, please."

She rose to her feet and followed him up the remaining steps. He opened the front door with a latchkey, and closed it again carefully, drawing both bolts. In the hall, with his fingers upon the handle of a door, he paused.

"The gentleman," he confided, "is ill. That is why there is haste. You won't be afraid?"

"Of course not," she answered. "Why should I be?"

Her composure seemed to please him. He ushered her into a room which might have been a library, but which seemed now as though pandemonium had struck it. There were suitcases and gun cases upon the floor, an overturned chair, evidences of some cyclonic disturbance, yet in the background there was plenty of good furniture and two sides of the wall were lined with well-filled bookcases. Upon a sofa near the fire, a man was lying, whose face when she entered was turned from her. In her quiet way, Miss Brown was observant, and two things struck her: first, a cut telephone wire flopping down upon the floor, leaving the instrument with a foot of green cord hanging from the receiver; secondly, a quaint odour which at first she could not place — it reminded her vaguely of fireworks.

"I have found a young lady typist, sir," her escort announced.

The man upon the sofa turned his head. She had an impression of a long, oval face, the cheek bones a little high, the mouth hard and grim, dark hair and deep-set grey eyes which seemed to be looking her through and through. He was apparently of about forty years of age,

of medium height, inclined to be thin, and yet with a suggestion of muscular strength about his attitude and the breadth of his shoulders. His voice, by which she was apt to judge men, failed her. He spoke with difficulty and as though in pain.

"Where did Mergen find you?" he demanded.

"Sitting upon your doorstep," she replied. "I have been lost in the fog."

He nodded. The explanation was sufficient.

"You are an expert shorthand writer?"

"I am considered so."

He leaned over, turned up a lamp by his side and made a gesture to his servant, who touched a further switch which filled the room with light. With a twinge of obvious pain the man raised himself upon his couch.

"Do you mind coming a little nearer?" he invited.

Miss Brown laid her case upon the table and approached the foot of the couch. The suffering man looked at her with an unfathomable expression shining out of his clear eyes — the expression of one who seeks wistfully, hopefully, yet with a deep anxiety. Miss Brown was wearing a brown mackintosh which had seen better days, and a plain little felt hat, suitable for the weather. Her gloves had been mended, her shoes were tidy and her skirts not too short. She had blue eyes, a rather broad forehead and an attractive mouth. Her complexion, except for the presence of an occasional freckle, was unusually fair and delicate. The little wisps of her brown hair, which were standing straight out under her hat, were of an agreeable colour. What seemed to bring relief to the man who was studying her, however, was the fact that her blue eyes met his without once faltering.

"I must know something about you before we begin to work," he said unexpectedly.

"Do you mean that you want a reference? You can

ring up the college where I was trained, or any of my clients — but I see you can't," she added, looking at the cut cord.

"I don't mean that sort of reference at all," he answered. "I don't understand your being there — upon my doorstep."

"It happened just as I told you," she assured him. "I was trying to find my way home, and the square seemed so quiet and restful I sat down for a moment."

"You had no idea where you were?" he asked, his eyes demanding the truth.

"Not the slightest in the world."

He seemed to some extent satisfied. He raised himself a little higher on the couch.

"Understand this, please," he went on. "I have some dictation of very vital importance which I must give to some one to-night — in case things go wrong with me. You can see that I am ill. The person to whom I give it must not only be trustworthy but she must understand that the fact of her having my notes in her possession may lead her into danger. What sort of a person are you?"

She remained quite patient with him and absolutely composed. Notwithstanding the quietness of her manner, however, her pulses were beating a little faster. She felt a curious tingling in her veins. There was something there behind the screen — the leather screen which sheltered the far side of the room — a man's leg, the shoe splashed with mud, the bottom of the trouser turned up. She looked away with a shudder. It occurred to her afterwards as extraordinary that she asked no question.

"My name is Brown," she recounted. "I am an orphan and I share a bed-sitting-room in Shepherd's Market with a girl who is generally away in the country. I have very good references. I was respectably brought up, I know that I am honest, and I am sure that I am trustworthy.

I have had work of some importance given to me from time to time."

"Do you mind taking a risk?" he asked eagerly. "If you do this work for me it may change many things in your life. You will be well paid, but you may have to give up everything else for a time. You may even have to hide."

"Is it honest work?" she ventured.

"I am not a thief or a criminal, if that is what you mean," he assured her. "You won't break any laws by working for me. It will be the lawbreakers you will have to fear. My name is Dessiter — Colonel Dessiter."

"The explorer?" she exclaimed.

"Yes."

She unfastened her mackintosh, hung it tidily over the back of her chair and produced her notebook. Any hesitation which she may have felt had vanished.

"I should like to undertake any work of yours," she said. "I am ready to begin now."

"You won't mind if it brings you a certain amount of trouble, perhaps — I must make you understand this — of danger?" he persisted.

She was already establishing herself, and had drawn her chair a little closer to him. Without her mackintosh, he saw that she was very neatly dressed in a plain one-piece gown of blue serge, that her throat was pleasantly white, and that her figure was slimmer and daintier than it had seemed under the enveloping mackintosh.

"I am not afraid of anything in life," she assured him, smiling very quietly for the first time. "At least, that is perhaps not quite true. I am afraid sometimes, when every day is exactly like the others, of becoming discontented. I don't understand, of course, what you mean, whether you are trying to frighten me or not. I don't see how just taking down what you want me to type for you

can lead me into any sort of danger here in London. However, even if it should, I am perfectly willing to do it all the same."

The man upon the sofa gave a sigh of satisfaction. His eyes rested upon her for a moment appreciatively. With her stylo pen in her fingers, her book with its virgin pages stretched out flat before her, her lips a little puckered, her eyes fixed expectantly upon him, she possessed an air of complete efficiency, the air of a woman alike capable and well poised.

"I have been very fortunate," he said, "that you chose to rest upon my doorstep. Whether you will think yourself equally fortunate in days to come or not, I do not know. At least you will not be bored. Please take down."

As her pen moved, Miss Brown felt unsuspected depths within her being respond to a new and growing sense of excitement. She realised for the first time, as one after the other she turned over the pages, the starvation of her simple life. It was romance for which she had craved, the stir of life lived for other purposes than successful commerce or politics of the County Council type. She felt around her the glow of the world of which sometimes in her happiest moments she had had faint, shadowy dreams born only to vanish like spring clouds. The blood began to tingle in her veins. Never once did her confident pen flag. Occasionally he tested her.

"Please repeat that sentence."

In each case she repeated it faultlessly. To her own ears, her voice sounded unemotional. The man on the couch knew better. He felt the response in her to the drama of that strange world into which she was passing at his bidding. Once his voice faltered, a grey pallor crept almost to his eyes. He stretched out his hand for the tumbler which stood by his side, and drained its contents.

"Would you like me to ring?" she asked compassionately, but without any signs of flurry.

He shook his head. His slight movement had disclosed something which for a moment had made her fingers shake. There was a rough bandage under his coat, a stain on the left side. She closed her eyes. When she opened them again it was forgotten.

"I am all right," he declared. "At least I shall be until I have finished with you. You're not — getting nervy?"

She smiled across at him reassuringly.

"I can take down everything that you give me," she promised, her pen poised over the paper, her fingers firm.

"And ask no questions?"

"And ask no questions."

He recommenced.

CHAPTER II

It had been twenty minutes to five when the door of the house in Lombertson Square had opened and Miss Brown had been transported into her new world. It was a quarter past eight when, after a brief pause, the man on the couch half closed his eyes.

"That's all," he announced.

Miss Brown remained with the pen still poised in her hand. Her eyes seemed to have grown larger. There was a new expression in her face — the expression of the visionary. She sat quite still, gazing steadily through the opposite wall of the room. Her thoughts were aflame. She was travelling in strange cities, burning under strange suns, feeling the breath of unexploited dangers, looking on, powerless, at horrible deeds, all the time tight-lipped, silent, walking with circumspect indifference through a maelstrom of diverse passions. There had been sunny patches at first in that variegated scheme of achievement — passages of luxury and wonder. It was only towards the end that she felt as though she had been led by the hand through the mazes of some inferno, had paused to see the whole world rocking before the terrors to come. The full significance of the story to which she had listened and to which her pen had given effect, had at that moment scarcely dawned upon her. All that she realised were her own newly discovered emotions, the difference in herself which this amazing flashlight into an unknown world had brought about. She suddenly fancied herself once more making her sedate way, satchel in hand, along Holborn, her notebook and pen ready to take down from dictation a price list of surgical appliances, jewellery, ladies' under-

clothes, or some commodity of the sort, and the thought set her shivering. "So practical and full of common sense," the principal of her college had said about Miss Brown when she left to start for herself. "A girl who could be trusted anywhere." The new Miss Brown was not so sure. She forced herself back to the present, closed her book reverently, adjusted the elastic band around it, and placed it in her satchel. Then she rose to her feet.

"Don't you think," she ventured, "that you ought to send for a doctor?"

"Why?" he asked.

Once more she sniffed the rather close atmosphere of the room.

"Because," she said, "you have apparently been shot, you are ill and your wound ought to be properly dressed."

"The time hasn't come for the doctor yet," he told her. "Mergen will send for him presently, as a matter of form. It really doesn't matter. I'm going to die."

He spoke with an indifference free from bravado yet somehow convincing. She found herself accepting the situation with perfect calmness.

"All the same," she insisted, "you ought to have a doctor and you must remember that as yet you have given me no instructions."

"Ring the bell, please," he enjoined.

She obeyed, and the manservant who had let her in entered.

"Some brandy for me, and a glass of port and some biscuits for the young lady," he directed.

Already she knew him better than to refuse. As a matter of fact, although she was conscious of no fatigue, she was glad of the wine. He moved himself a little and rested upon his elbow looking at her.

"What do you think of all that?" he asked, motioning towards the satchel.

She touched her forehead with her hand.

"As yet, I can't think about it," she confessed. "It is all here — every sentence. I feel that it is going to live with me for the rest of my life."

He nodded approvingly.

"I am not a braggart," he said, "but there is no other man who has lived through what I have lived through, who has seen the things I have seen, and come back alive. They've got me now though. I made one slip in Warsaw, of all places. I lost my temper. You must never give way to any human feeling, Miss Brown, when you're carrying your life in your hands, and the lives of other people."

The wine was brought. He sipped his brandy meditatively; she drank half a glassful of her port at a gulp.

"So you smelt the gunpowder?" he asked abruptly.

"I smelt it directly I entered the room."

"Observant," he remarked. "As a matter of fact, though, it was I who shot him, not he me. His long trek is ended anyway. He is dead."

Miss Brown did not flinch. She looked around the room, and her eyes conjured up the horror which must rest behind that heavy leather screen. She stared at the protruding foot.

"The best man they ever had," Dessiter continued. "It has been a duel between us since I left the East and began to get hold of the threads of this horrible business. I had scoffed at the whole thing before. I never believed there was anything definite — anything to be really feared from this generation of madmen. I obeyed orders though. Perhaps it's lucky for the world I did. The alarmists were right for once."

"And this man?" she reminded him.

"A genius!" Dessiter muttered. "The most wonderful of all the black shadows who have been doing their work

through China, India and Afghanistan, in every British colony, in every civilized country. It was his task to hunt me down. Sometimes we missed one another by minutes in a race across a continent, sometimes we were in the same city, the same café, the same hotel, and he never knew. This last time, though, I played my first false card. Since then he's never left my heels. They generally hunt in packs. He outdistanced the others, and he paid. Have you ever seen a dead man, Miss Brown?"

"Never in my life," she acknowledged.

"Are you afraid?"

"Not now. I'm afraid of nothing."

"Go and look," he invited.

She rose to her feet and crossed the room with unfaltering footsteps — she, the daughter of a country lawyer, who had never seen men fight even in merely quarrelsome mood, whose ways had lain always along the humdrum thoroughfares of life, boarding school and tennis parties, genteel poverty and work, always respectable, always doing the correct and ladylike thing. She passed the overturned chair which apparently marked the spot where the struggle had taken place, glanced at the tablecloth and smashed vase of flowers lying upon the floor, and with her hand upon the screen peered round behind it. To her it always remained a tragic memory, although at that moment she was unconscious of feeling the slightest emotion. The dead man lay there, smallish in stature, dark; an undoubted foreigner, with blue chin, jet black hair, clothes of un-English cut, with a small, round hole in his forehead, waxen pale, a thin cambric handkerchief over his eyes. One knee was a little doubled up and the collapse of death had relaxed his features. There was an impression of shrunkenness about the lips. Miss Brown looked at him long and thoughtfully, placing him in those long journeyings through that strange, phantasmagoric story. She

came back to her place with steady footsteps, resumed her seat and finished her glass of wine.

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked calmly. "You'll have to ring up the police or something, won't you? You can't keep him in the room."

There was a gleam almost of admiration in Dessiter's eyes as he looked at his questioner.

"Mergen will arrange something later on," he said. "You see, I shall die myself before midnight, and although this is London and not Bagdad, I can assure you nothing that happens in this house will be talked about very much."

She could have cried out in passionate protest against his calm acceptance of his fate, have reminded him wildly that a man who had lived his life and achieved what he had achieved should defy even death. She could have fallen upon her knees and implored him to have his wound dressed, to keep his feet upon the earth — but she did none of these things.

"I cannot see any reason why you should die," she said, in her ordinary matter-of-fact tone. "You should give yourself a chance, at any rate, by sending for a doctor and a nurse. If you will not, I think I could arrange that bandage myself."

He shook his head.

"There is no time," he declared. "He was just a second too soon for me. He'd cut the telephone and his knife was at my chest just as I was drawing. All that is necessary now is to live long enough to tell you what to do with those notes. After that, it really doesn't matter very much. My career is ended anyway. You see," he went on, "for fifteen years the world has known of me only as Dessiter, the explorer, the traveller, the man who, because he knew every language, could visit countries the frontiers of which no one else dared cross. They have credited me quite correctly with an occasional commission

from the Government to the rulers of these countries and lately I have encouraged that side of my reputation. I have dined with kings and chieftains who have never even spoken to any other European. I have a gift of understanding the Oriental mind, and before this other greater thing came I did good work. We kept that always in the foreground. What people have never known, what even now only you and three others do know, is that for some years all these activities have been merely subterfuge, camouflage for the greater work."

She tapped her satchel reverently.

"It is not finished," she reminded him.

"But I am, alive or dead," he rejoined. "There isn't a city in the world in which our enemies are established where their agents are not warned against me. There's a sort of Holy War amongst them to destroy me. I shall never again be able to wander across Europe at will. Even here — in London — well, you see what has happened. They're cowardly killers, but they kill all right."

He sipped some more brandy. Outside, the sound of traffic seemed to have died away. Little wisps of fog had penetrated into the room through the tightly closed windows. A yellow shaft of it hung from the lamp to the curtains.

"Go and look out," he directed. "Be careful that you are not seen."

She pushed the curtains a few inches on one side and looked towards the square.

"I can see nothing," she reported. "The fog is if anything denser. The world seems dead. Even the traffic has ceased."

"Good!" he murmured. "Ring the bell, please, and come back to your place."

She did as she was told. The same manservant at once presented himself. His master addressed him in a lan-

guage which Miss Brown had certainly never heard before, and the origin of which she could not pretend to divine. She judged it to be either Russian or Czechoslovakian, and looked once more curiously at the servant. Notwithstanding his smooth face and perfectly trained manner, she decided that there was after all something un-English about him. He listened to all his master had to say without change of expression, replying often, fluently but respectfully. Presently, with some keys which Dessiter produced from his trousers pocket, he opened a drawer and took out a linen bag of cigarettes and a thin packet of letters which, in obedience to a gesture from his master, he laid before Miss Brown. Dessiter lit one of the cigarettes and waved him away.

"My servant, like you," he explained, "wants me to go to the hospital. Will you listen carefully now, please, Miss Brown?"

"I am listening," she assured him.

"The mechanical side of our work is over. Will you accept a trust from me?"

She looked across at him. Her eyes were very blue, her tone almost solemn.

"I will," she assented.

"It is possible," he warned her, "that it may entail even an additional amount of personal risk."

"I am not afraid."

"It may interfere with your present scheme of life to some extent," he went on, after a moment or two of reflection.

"My present scheme of life counts for nothing," she declared. "I find it detestable."

She was surprised at her own words. Up to an hour ago it seemed to her that she had plodded along the level ways if not joyously, at least with a certain measure of content.

"The letters which you have there," he confided, "are almost as important as the subject matter which I have dictated. There are the addresses of the secret meeting places and the names of the principal conspirators whom we have to fight in most of the large towns of Europe. There are two original letters also, one of which explains the whole of the Chinese movement, and another which, if it were published ill-advisedly, must mean an instant European war. They are to be kept with your book awaiting my instructions. No one must ever know that they are in your possession. They are for the guidance of the person who comes after me."

"No one shall ever know," she promised.

"I am convinced that you are trustworthy," he continued, "but these people are clever. There were more of them on the heels of our little friend behind the screen, and but for the fog they would have found their way in somehow or other, dealt with me and helped themselves to these letters. You may get home safely to-night, especially as the fog is really thicker, but their own secret service is more than equal to ours, which here in England may be said not to exist at all. They'll find you out in the long run. Only, it must be too late. This is what I want you to do, Miss Brown. You will sleep to-night with your door locked and the book under your pillow. Have you a banking account?"

She shook her head.

"I have only twenty-four pounds in the world and that is in the Post Office."

"Open that drawer on your left-hand side, please," he directed.

She obeyed and discovered a sealed envelope which she held out towards him.

"There are five hundred pounds there in Bank of England notes," he said. "To-morrow morning you will go

to the South Audley Street Branch of the Central Bank and open an account. You will deposit your notebook and those letters in the vaults of the bank."

"You don't wish me to transcribe my notes then?" she asked.

"Not for the moment," he replied. "I want you to wait until the man who takes up my work appears."

"How shall I know about him?"

"You will subscribe to the *Times*," he told her. "Every morning you will read the personal column. You will wait until there is a message for 'Edith' from 'Algernon.' A tube will be mentioned in the message. It will probably sound ridiculous. You must not mind that. Most of those foolish-looking advertisements you see, apparently from young people who have met in 'buses, or from wives who are terrified of jealous husbands, are really code messages from members of the criminal world or from people in my position."

"What am I to do with the five hundred pounds?" Miss Brown enquired practically.

"You can count it as part payment of your fee for the work you have done and the work you may do. Don't alter your manner of life, but spend it as you wish. I am going to tell you quite frankly," he went on, after a moment's pause, during which he had changed his position slightly, "that in time to come you may consider that five hundred pounds a very inadequate sum. You may find that from now on life may become a more difficult undertaking with you."

She saw the anxiety in his eyes and did her best to reassure him.

"If it does," she declared, with a confident little smile, "I shall be glad. I don't think I knew it, but I was very tired of life as it was."

He gave a nod of content, threw away his cigarette and

lit another. There were beads of sweat upon his forehead and his hand more than once sought his side.

"I do wish you would let me try to arrange that bandage better," she begged. "It is absurd to have made up your mind that you are going to die."

He smiled enigmatically. His voice was still firm and his eyes remained clear, but she realised from the way he moved that he was in increasing pain.

"Mergen will bring me a fresh bandage in a few minutes," he told her. "He is quite expert. If anybody can keep me alive, he will, but after all — it doesn't really matter — now. For seventeen years I have kept alike my nerve and my temper. I have seen men tortured without interfering, women baited almost to death, hideous deeds perpetrated before my eyes, simply to make me betray myself. I have never flinched until that night in Warsaw. That was my end. As soon as it is possible, Miss Brown, you shall be given an opportunity of transcribing those notes in safety. You will be free then of your trust. You can go back to your life of yesterday, and forget."

She looked at him steadily.

"I shall never forget," she said.

"I don't think you will. I don't think you will forget, and I know that you will be faithful. It was a wonderful chance which brought you to rest upon my doorstep."

"Can I come and see how you are to-morrow?"

"You must on no account come near this house," he insisted gravely. "You must look upon me from to-night as a person who has passed out of your life. If ever there is need for any further communication between us, you can trust Mergen, and only Mergen. Until you receive the message, carry on with your everyday life."

She rose to her feet and began to button up her mackintosh. She looked doubtfully at the shaft of fog which seemed to have become denser.

"I am not in the least nervous about myself," she said. "I am only afraid of getting lost outside, because I shall have the book with me. How do you think I had better try to get back to Shepherd's Market?"

"All that is arranged," he told her. "Mergen saw to it while we were at work. He is waiting outside for you."

On the corner of the mantelpiece was lying a trifle at which she had gazed with fascinated eyes more than once. She leaned over and took it into her hand — a small but deadly looking automatic, loaded in five chambers.

"Will you give me this?" she begged. "If you do, I promise I will use it sooner than have the book taken away."

He smiled quietly.

"The time for that sort of thing," he remarked, "has almost passed. I remember when I had to use a revolver every week of my life. I used that little affair this afternoon for the first time for a year. Yes, take it if you will, but be careful."

She reopened her satchel and slipped it in. She shivered a little as she remembered that the one empty barrel meant a man's life. Then she finished buttoning up her mackintosh, set her hat straight and looked down at him timidly. He held out his hand.

"Good-bye, Miss Brown," he said. "I am very thankful to the fog for having sent you here."

"And I am thankful too," she declared fervently. "You will have your bandage arranged at once if I go?"

"Immediately," he assured her.

Upon the threshold she gave a farewell glance around the room. Its unreality seemed suddenly overpowering — a dead man behind the screen, a dying man upon the sofa, and all the throb and glamour of that marvellous story reproduced in cold black ink in the book she was carrying. She closed her eyes, half expecting to reopen them and

find herself still sitting in the fog upon the bottom step outside the house. As a matter of fact she reopened them in the hall to find Mergen waiting for her.

"Will you please come this way, Miss, and follow me closely," he begged.

He relieved her of her typewriter, and, gripping the satchel in her hand, she followed him out of the back door and down a flight of steps into an area. Finding his way by hugging the wall, he opened another door which led into what seemed to be a mews. There were two lights burning fiercely yet dimly through the fog from some vehicle, the nature of which she could scarcely distinguish. Mergen whispered for a moment with a vaguely seen figure. Then he turned back to his companion.

"I am afraid you will find it a little uncomfortable, Miss," he said, "but it will not be for long. Do you mind getting in?"

They let down some steps. Miss Brown climbed into what seemed to be a furniture delivery van, empty save for a single chair. A man scrambled in after her and stood by her side. The van started off. Through the window she could faintly discern another figure seated by the driver.

"Tell me your address, please, Miss," her companion begged.

She told him, and, as soon as they had emerged into a wider thoroughfare, he opened the window and repeated it to the driver. Afterwards he resumed his place, standing by the door and holding on to the handle with the air of an attendant guarding a prison van. Miss Brown, whose stock of curiosity was almost exhausted, nevertheless asked him one question. Notwithstanding his plain clothes there was certainly something official about his manner.

"Are you a policeman?"

He smiled down upon her in noncommittal fashion.

"Not in the ordinary sense of the word, Miss," he replied, "but I'm going to look after you all right."

They blundered their way through the streets, climbed the kerbstone near Hyde Park Corner, and, finally, finding a clearer patch in Piccadilly, rattled along at a quite respectable speed, until they came to a standstill before the strange, shabby little house, squeezed in between a stationer's and a baker's shop which was Miss Brown's abode. Her escort helped her to descend, gripping her tightly by the arm.

"Don't stand about, Miss," he begged. "This fog isn't wholesome."

The driver had also descended from his seat, and with the third man, who had followed him, formed a complete little bodyguard around her. Miss Brown inserted her key and opened the door.

"All right inside, Miss?" one of the men asked anxiously.

Miss Brown looked into her room which was on the ground floor.

"Quite all right, thank you," she replied.

The door, which fastened with a spring lock, was closed with a little slam. Miss Brown had reached home safely.

CHAPTER III

Miss Brown, although securely established in her bed-sitting-room, spent an uneasy night in the new world which lay hidden amongst the cabalistic signs of her note-book. Once or twice she woke with a start and listened. An approaching footstep which paused beneath her window brought her left hand to the precious packet under her pillow, and her right to that unfamiliar little weapon upon the table by her side. Always the footsteps passed on, however; the rumble of distant traffic became less distinct and the early morning stillness soothed her once more to slumber. When she awoke it was past eight o'clock and a pale gleam of unexpected sunshine was shining through the window. She lay quite still for a few minutes, realising little by little this strange thing which had happened to her. As soon as it was all there in her mind, and her brain as well as her body was fully awake, she rose, wrapped herself in a blue dressing gown, which was almost her only vanity, made her way to a room at the end of the dingy hall, deposited a coin in a meter, and enjoyed a warm bath with the packet upon the shelf in front of her. Afterwards, with it still tucked under her arm, she returned to her room, lit a small gas stove and boiled a kettle whilst she dressed. As a rule, she stepped out to the baker's adjoining for a roll, but this morning she was filled with the one consuming desire to deposit her precious volume in safety without running the slightest risk. At ten o'clock she placed it in her satchel which she carefully and elaborately strapped up after a method of her own, discarded her mackintosh in favour of an, alas, very cheap fur coat, unfastened the door and stepped hesi-

tatingly out into the street. There was no one who seemed to be taking the least interest in her movements, and she hurried with beating heart along the narrow thoroughfare towards the passage leading into Curzon Street. As she neared the entrance, however, she slackened her pace. She tried to tell herself that she was developing a new trick of nervousness. Nevertheless, the apprehension had seized her that she was being followed. She was certain of it. Ahead of her there was a man loitering in front of a stationer's shop, apparently studying the row of placards. At the sound of her light footsteps he looked up and she felt his eyes travel beyond her to some one in the rear conveying a message — or was it a warning? She swung suddenly round. A man who might have been a clerk on his way to work or a small shopkeeper, an insignificant-looking person with a stubborn, evil expression in his pallid face, was barely a yard behind her. She stood on one side to let him pass, taking care to keep the satchel she was carrying between herself and the wall. The man at once divined that her suspicions were aroused and made a plunge forward, waving a signal at the same time to the loiterer in front. He secured the satchel, but he secured at the same time Miss Brown herself — Miss Brown lying upon her side on the pavement, dragged almost into the gutter, with an intolerable pain in her wrist to which she had tightly strapped her precious burden before she had left her room. The man, realising what had happened, stooped down to deal with the strap, but intervention, almost dramatically unexpected, had arrived. A tall, shabbily dressed young man, whom Miss Brown had not previously noticed, had suddenly appeared upon the scene. A word of tardy warning flashed from the loiterer, but her assailant was already lying upon his back in the gutter. There was the sound of hasty footsteps, and Miss Brown, very muddy, very shaken and with a

deep red mark upon her wrist, struggled to her feet almost to fall into the arms of a hurrying policeman.

"What's the matter, Miss?" he demanded.

"A man tried to rob me," she explained. "I have something quite valuable in this satchel. You see one of them tried to snatch it away, only he pulled me down too, and then when he was trying to cut the strap some one knocked him down."

The policeman looked around in every direction; Miss Brown's assailant had disappeared, also her deliverer.

"Which way did they go, Miss?" he enquired.

"I can't tell," she answered impatiently. "Don't bother about them, please. Take me to a taxi."

"Any one see this affair?" the policeman persisted, addressing the small crowd of stragglers who had hurried up.

"They went through to Curzon Street," one person declared.

"No, they didn't. The man who snatched the young lady's bag bolted back down Chapel Street," another contradicted.

The policeman shrugged his shoulders. He marched off with Miss Brown, summoned a taxicab and waited until she got into it. She gave the address of the bank in South Audley Street which she had looked up in the telephone book.

"You couldn't come with me?" she asked the policeman, a little hesitatingly.

"Off my beat, Miss," he replied. "Nothing won't happen to you between here and the bank. Name and address, please. I'm going back to see if I can hear anything of those fellows."

She waited whilst he wrote it down, and then the taxicab rattled off. Outside the bank she was in the act of descending when she saw a man step out of a following

vehicle as though himself about to enter the building. She called the taxi driver from his seat and offered him five shillings with her left hand.

"Will you walk across to the bank door with me, please?" she begged. "I am sure that man has been following us, and I have something valuable with me."

"That's all right, Miss," the chauffeur assured her cheerfully. "They know me all right, these chaps. I'm a bit of a bruiser. They won't touch you as long as I'm about."

He glanced curiously at the satchel and at the mark upon her wrist, and gently guided her across the pavement. The man who had seemed about to enter the bank, hesitated, and returned to his taxicab. With a breath of relief she crossed the threshold of the building, and made her way to the counter upon which she laid her satchel. A young man with flaxen hair and pince-nez, who had been engaged in the task of counting a pile of treasury notes, looked at her in surprise.

"Will you unfasten this, please, and lock it up at once in your vaults?" she begged.

He unfastened the strap and started as he saw the condition of her wrist.

"Some one tried to snatch it away from me just now," she explained. "I have five hundred pounds here to open an account with you, and a card from Colonel Dessiter, but first of all, will you please put that satchel somewhere safe?"

The young man smiled and placed it on a rack behind him. The manager, who had been walking round, strolled up, glanced at the single line written on Dessiter's card, and passed the bundle of notes which Miss Brown had produced to the clerk. He looked at Miss Brown curiously.

"We shall be delighted to open an account with you,"

he assured her. "Do you wish to put this five hundred pounds to a current or a deposit account?"

"A current account, if you please," Miss Brown decided. "But first of all will you lock up that satchel and give me a receipt for it?"

The young man, at a word from the manager, took it away and disappeared through a trap door behind the last of the three counters. Miss Brown gave a sigh of relief and sat down. She began to realise that her wrist was hurting.

"Have you any instructions about this precious packet of yours?" the manager enquired, with a smile.

"It is to be given up to no one except myself," she replied with emphasis. "No written order for it is to be accepted, even if the receipt is produced. When I want it I shall come for it."

The manager himself wrote out a slip which Miss Brown signed. She drew a long breath of relief.

"It's down in the vaults by this time, isn't it?" she asked.

"In a steel compartment," he assured her, with his eyes fixed upon her wrist. "It's just as safe as it would be in the Bank of England, and it will be there until you fetch it away yourself. In the meantime, please let my clerk have two specimen signatures, and he will give you a cheque book and a pass book. By the bye," he added, leaning over the counter, "is Colonel Dessiter a friend of yours?"

"Scarcely that," she replied cautiously. "I have done some work for him."

"You have heard of his illness?"

She looked at him for a moment in silence. The manager thought that he had never seen such simple and ingenuous blue eyes. All the time she was wondering how much she had better know.

"I heard something about it," she admitted. "I hope it isn't serious."

"I wasn't sure whether you had heard," he answered gravely. "Colonel Dessiter died early this morning."

Miss Brown made her way out into a street of gloom with a curious and altogether new pain at her heart. That gleam of unusual sunshine which had greeted her waking moments had long since passed away, threatening clouds were hanging low down and a slight, drizzling rain was falling. It was already so dark that one or two of the electric lamps were lit. After a moment's hesitation she decided to walk back to her rooms. There was some work on hand to be dealt with. She remembered Dessiter's injunction to continue as far as possible her ordinary life until the message came. She walked along wrapped in her thoughts, quite heedless of the fact that the rain was falling upon her fur coat. Once or twice she fancied that she was being followed, but the fact scarcely disturbed her now. She had succeeded in the first part of her trust, and for herself personally she had no fear. Her sedate progress was, as a matter of fact, a very sad one. There was a lump in her throat, the unshed tears were dimming the light of her eyes. It seemed such a terrible anticlimax to the new wonder of her life to think that those lips from which had flowed that amazing story had spoken their last word, that the man who had escaped death a hundred times, in a hundred dangerous places, should have come to his end in his own room in the centre of the most police-sheltered city in the world. A little sob finally did escape her, which, however, she promptly checked. She called at the newspaper shop, gave an order for the *Times* to be sent to her every morning, made her way back to her room and locked the door. The next hour or so was no concern of any one except Miss Brown.

CHAPTER IV

Miss Brown was a conscientious young woman, and, notwithstanding the dislocation of her life by her recent adventure, she remembered, after an hour's seclusion, the fact that she had clients who were expecting her visit, and also that it was her duty to respect the earnest injunction of the man around whom all her sad thoughts were now centred, and carry on as usual. She bandaged her wrist, which was still painful, bathed her eyes, and before half past eleven she had started off upon her round. She transcribed some letters for a retired manufacturer in Hampstead, received some copy from a young author in the same neighbourhood, and in the afternoon spent a couple of hours in a City office. At six o'clock she returned to her room, weary with her round of labours, and with a sense of suppressed excitement which still possessed her. She made herself some tea, took off her gown which was a little wet, and made herself comfortable, stretched in an easy-chair in front of the small gas fire. She considered the events of the day thoughtfully. She was by no means a nervous person or over-imaginative, but she had nevertheless been haunted even during her recent pilgrimages by a feeling that she was never alone, that she was always being followed, always being watched. On the 'bus going to Hampstead, a young man had picked up a glove with which she had no concern, tried to press it upon her, and afterwards to enter into conversation. She had seen the same young man upon her return journey, but had avoided him by taking a 'bus for a short distance in another direction. It was quite possible, of course, that his interest in her was simply the interest of

the ordinary *boulevardier*, for Miss Brown, notwithstanding her reserved manner and demure appearance and the fact that she neither invited nor responded to any advances, was still not at all unaccustomed to finding herself an object of some interest to questing sentimentalists of the other sex. The young man, however, had been persistent, and he had been not the only one interested in her movements. In the City, she was conscious of brushing against a girl whom she had seen at least twice before, during the morning, and whose friendly smile was evidently intended to be an invitation to some sort of casual remark. She had allowed neither incident to trouble her. Nothing had interfered with the calm and methodical pursuit of her day's business, although to each of her clients she had hinted that she might be obliged to miss one day at any moment. Now that she was back again in her room and alone, she reviewed once more the events of the past few hours. The young man and the girl might both have been coincidences, but there remained with her that uneasy sense of following eyes which had never left her throughout the day, which had made her glance uneasily around even when she had fitted her latchkey into the door and impelled her now, even in the seclusion of her room, to twice leave her seat and glance out into the narrow thoroughfare. Suddenly the thought flashed into her mind that the first part of her task was safely accomplished, that the precious book with the accompanying documents was deep in the vaults of the bank where not a living soul could reach it except herself. Espionage for the present, at any rate, was futile. The sense of oppression left her. She poured herself out a second cup of tea and opened the *Times*.

She studied first with a new interest the headlines in the general news column. Then she turned to the leading article which she read word for word with an absorbed

interest. It recalled to her mind the dominant note in the press during the critical periods of the war — grave but unfailingly hopeful, always ready to recognise and emphasize the serious side of a terrible situation, whilst insisting upon the necessity for, almost the religion of, a dignified confidence. There was the same note to be traced to-day in the article which she perused so carefully. The headlines in the general news spoke of attempted strikes in all parts of the Dominions, of fervent propaganda by the men of the advanced section of the communist world, of interference everywhere with British trade, and British enterprise. The leading article, too, made no effort to minimize the perils of the situation. A coal strike was threatened in Great Britain within the next three months — a strike which in time was to spread to the railways, the transport workers, the wharfingers. The Trades Unions were to be defied, the new party — as they called themselves — of the people, were to issue the challenge and their leaders were already loud-voiced in their confident predictions of success. It was all generalisation, of course, but Miss Brown wished very much that she had some one to explain the whole thing to her. "Capital and Labour," she read in one paragraph, "would in those days of strike change places. Capital might buy guns, but Capital could never buy a single man to shoulder them. Capital might hold out its bags of gold but the food was in the hands of the people who carried it." Then she looked at the speaker's name and smiled. Something might happen to him, she reflected, when those notes of hers were safely transcribed.

She turned to the personal column, knowing full well, however, that it was too soon to expect her message. Afterwards, still searching for any mention of the tragedy of Lombertson Square, she came upon an item which she read curiously from beginning to end. It was headed:—

MAN FOUND SHOT IN LOMBERTSON SQUARE

Early this morning the police constable on duty in Lombertson Square discovered the body of a man lying against the railings of the gardens, shot through the forehead. He was apparently a middle-aged foreigner, without papers or any marks of identification, nor was there any trace of a weapon in the neighbourhood. The body was removed to the nearest mortuary pending identification.

Miss Brown shivered a little, but passed on in her eager yet apprehensive search. She found at last what she had been looking for. In a remote corner there was a paragraph consisting of two lines:—

We regret to announce the death at his residence in Lombertson Square of Colonel Dessiter, D. S. O., the well-known traveller.

There was not another line, no obituary notice, no journalistic acknowledgement of the fact that a famous man had given his life for his country. There were long paragraphs about people of whom she had never heard. A rich tradesman's gifts to charity were expatiated upon at length, but the man who had saved his country at least two wars, and given his life in the struggle to avert still greater disaster, was dismissed in those two scanty lines. She threw the newspaper down indignantly.

The woman to whom the house belonged, a shadowy sort of person, seldom seen or heard, made a brief appearance.

"A young gentleman has called twice to see you from some newspaper," she announced.

"Some newspaper?" Miss Brown repeated.

The woman looked over her shoulder.

"He is here again. I thought I'd let you know."

A young man with his hat in his hand stood upon the threshold and bowed. He was a very harmless looking person indeed, and a complete stranger to Miss Brown. He wore old-fashioned gold-rimmed spectacles, carried the familiar notebook, and his manner was not only apologetic but a little nervous.

"Could you favour me with five minutes' interview, Miss Brown?" he begged.

The lady of the house had already disappeared. Miss Brown rose to her feet in some perplexity.

"I think that there must be a mistake," she said.

The young man ventured to take a step forward. He pushed the door to behind him but did not close it.

"Perhaps I have been misinformed," he began. "My people heard that you had been doing work for Colonel Dessiter who died in the night. We understand that you were there only yesterday. He was engaged, as is everywhere known, upon a book of memoirs. My editor would be greatly obliged if you would give us any information."

Miss Brown waved her visitor to a seat. She looked at him for a moment thoughtfully. Was this, she wondered, to be the beginning of a new epoch in her life, during which she would have to weigh every word she uttered, be all the time in a state of suspicion and doubt. The young man appeared entirely harmless, and there was nothing in his manner in any way offensive. She much preferred him to the young man on the 'bus.

"What newspaper do you represent?" she asked.

"The *Daily Despatch*."

"You have a card?"

"Not with me," he regretted. "I am fairly well-known, as is my paper. My name is Philip Jackson. I often sign my articles."

"And what is it you want to know from me?"

"In the first place, whether it is true that Colonel Des-

siter up to a late hour yesterday evening was dictating to you a chapter of his reminiscences? "

"I have nothing to say about that," she answered, after a moment's reflection.

"Can you tell me," he went on, a sudden little gleam in his eyes, "whether you have in your possession any notes taken down from him in the nature of unfinished work? My people would very much like to produce anything he wrote or even said during his last few hours."

"I have nothing of that sort available," Miss Brown declared.

Her visitor coughed.

"You will understand, madam," he continued, "that I am not here as a beggar. My paper is a rich one. We pay very highly for material we can use. We are prepared to pay you very highly indeed for any notes which Colonel Dessiter may have given you during the last few days."

"The *Daily Despatch*, you said your paper was," she murmured, after a moment's silence.

The young man inclined his head. Miss Brown took up the telephone book. A telephone was the one joint extravagance which she and her friend permitted themselves, and this cost them little as it was taken over from a previous tenant. She turned over the pages and, unhooking the receiver, asked for a number.

"May I ask to whom you are telephoning? " the young man ventured.

"I am telephoning to the office of the *Daily Despatch*," Miss Brown replied. "You have no card, and I wish to be sure of your *bona fides* before I enter into conversation with you."

He smiled. It was meant to be a pleasant smile but somehow or other there was a sour little twist at the corners of the lips.

"Don't forget my name," he begged — "Philip Jackson."

Miss Brown secured her connection and requested a word with a sub-editor or some one in authority.

"I am ringing up to know," she said, "whether you have a journalist in your employ by the name of Philip Jackson, and whether you have sent him round to interview a Miss Edith Brown in Shepherd's Market, a stenographer?"

"We have a Philip Jackson on our staff," was the prompt reply, "but we have not sent him to interview anybody, and he is at present writing an article in this office."

"I am very much obliged to you," Miss Brown replied, and rang off. "So you are an imposter!" she added, turning to her visitor. "Somehow or other I thought so."

The young man made no direct reply.

"We can arrive, perhaps, now," he suggested, "at a more satisfactory understanding. You were at Colonel Dessiter's house for two or three hours last night, during which time he dictated an account to you of his recent travels on the Continent, and, I believe, entrusted you with several documents. What are you going to do with the result of your work?"

Miss Brown looked at him steadily.

"You must be a very foolish person," she said, "to come here and ask me such questions — that is, if you seriously expect to be answered."

"Will you sell me your notes," the young man asked, "for five hundred pounds?"

"I certainly will not," she told him.

"Will you sell them to me for a thousand pounds?"

"You are wasting time."

The pseudo-journalist reflected.

"Supposing I offered you three thousand pounds in cash for them?"

"If I were a man," Miss Brown said, "you would have been in the street by now. As it is, will you please go away? You don't seem to be aware of the fact that you are insulting me."

"I wouldn't take it like that if I were you," the young man advised quietly. "Three thousand pounds is a great deal of money, and if you preserve your present attitude you are interfering, even though passively, with matters of which you know nothing. Believe me, you are going to bring down upon yourself a great deal of trouble. You will have very little peace left in life, perhaps even, if you are obstinate, in the end, very little life."

"Do you think that I am afraid?" Miss Brown asked, with a flash in her blue eyes.

"Unfortunately I can see that you are not," he admitted promptly. "It would be better for you if you were — much better in the long run."

She pointed to the door.

"If you go quickly," she said, "it will be all right. Otherwise, I am going to wave my hand to the policeman who is standing on the opposite side of the pavement."

The young man took up his hat.

"You have nothing to fear from me in the way of physical violence," he assured her. "I do not belong to the department which exercises — such — shall I say, pressure. I wish you good afternoon, Miss Brown. I warn you that before you are through with this business you will either change your mind or regret it bitterly."

She made no reply, content to be rid of him. He let himself out by the front door, closing it carefully behind him. She watched him thread his way amongst the people in the crooked little street until he disappeared in the alley. No more harmless looking person could be imagined, yet

somehow or other as she looked after him she gave a shiver. There was something about the very restraint of his manner, the monotonous lack of emotion in his tone, even the way he walked, which seemed to her sinister. When at last he had disappeared, she went over to the looking-glass and indulged in an angry grimace at her own reflection; she hated to admit that fancies were creeping into her life.

Until seven o'clock, Miss Brown was busy working for the young author in Hampstead. As soon as she had finished her task, she pinned the sheets together carefully, glanced them through with an approving little movement of the head, put them safely away in a drawer, and prepared to make a modest *toilette*. Just as she was putting on her hat, there was the click of the front door being opened by a latchkey, a familiar step in the passage, the door of her room was thrown open, and a tall girl in country clothes, carrying a suitcase, appeared on the threshold.

"Frances!"

"In the flesh and rather too much of it. Glad I caught you!"

The two girls embraced. Perhaps Miss Brown had never before in her life been so glad to see her friend.

"What a welcome!" the latter exclaimed, laughing, as she seated herself upon the edge of the bed. "What's the matter, Edith? Lonely?"

"Not exactly. But what brings you up? I thought you weren't going to be here until next week."

The girl threw off her hat disclosing a neatly shingled head of fair hair and swung a shapely silk-clad leg.

"I got absolutely fed up with the chickens," she confided. "So I put a few things into a suitcase and left Mollie in charge. We'll go out and dine somewhere — where there's some music, if we can run to it."

Miss Brown endeavoured to look severe.

"How on earth, Frances," she answered, "can you expect to make chicken farming pay if you keep on leaving the place to look after itself?"

"I don't. There's Mollie."

"Mollie doesn't count. Besides, there's the expense."

"The chicken farm never will pay," Frances confided — "not anything that's worth while. Perhaps by the time I'm forty-five and don't care a damn about anything, there'll be just enough to keep me from sponging on my relations, and by the time I'm fifty or fifty-five I may be able to get rid of it and live as an elderly spinster at a cheap boarding house. Horrible! Don't preach, Edith. Get into your best clothes and we'll go out and have some fun."

Miss Brown, endeavouring to conceal her satisfaction, took off her shabby little hat, and slipped off her gown, whilst Frances unfastened her bag. They compared notes as to their *toilettes* and Miss Brown, notwithstanding a faint protest as she thought of the rain-splashed streets, was persuaded to change into silk stockings and patent shoes. When at last they were ready, they presented the picture of two simply clad but very pleasant-looking young women; Frances, with her added height, her more regular features and greater vivacity, perhaps the more attractive, but Miss Brown, in her neat black dress, her trim figure and her air of complete composure, also in her way pleasing to look upon. They locked up the room, passed out into the street and through the alley to Curzon Street, where, to Frances' amazement, Miss Brown summoned a taxicab.

"Heavens, Edith, what are you up to?" she exclaimed. "We could have had a cocktail each for the price of this taxi."

Her friend smiled.

"I have had a very lucrative commission," she confided. "Nothing in the world could have been more fortunate than your coming up. It's my treat."

"God bless the child!" Frances exclaimed. "It isn't going to be anything of the sort, and you know it, but what's happened to you? You're changed somehow."

Miss Brown smiled a little sadly.

"You're clever," she acknowledged. "How am I changed?"

Frances looked at her long and thoughtfully out of her grey eyes.

"Edith," she confided, "I scarcely know. You look somehow as though something serious had happened, as though there were suddenly a background of unhappiness in your life, and — something else."

"Go on, please."

"I can't," Frances replied. "Give me a little time. Perhaps I'll be able to tell you before the evening's over."

Miss Brown leaned back in the cab and for a moment the light died out of her blue eyes. She was back in that fog-hung room with its strange odour and atmosphere of tragedy, listening to that wonderful voice, back in the throes of hero worship. She was unconscious of her friend's curious scrutiny. Then a twinge of pain came to her heart, and her eyes moistened. Simultaneously she felt herself grateful for the flood of idle chatter in which Frances had chosen suddenly to indulge.

CHAPTER V

They dined at a large and popular restaurant where, before the war, the sight of two young women at a table alone would have caused a great deal of remark. An epicure might have found fault with the somewhat stereotyped meal with which they were served, but to the two girls, whose evening repast consisted generally of scrambled eggs with tea, or some kindred variation, everything seemed delicious. When the coffee was brought, and Frances had lit her cigarette — Miss Brown never smoked — they were in a state of post-prandial content almost masculine. Frances' feet were beating time to the music.

"I warn you, dear little mother propriety," she said, "that if any one comes who looks in any way decent and asks me to dance, I shall accept."

Miss Brown's expression was grave.

"It's hard luck not knowing any men here, Frances," she sighed, "and you dance so beautifully, but I don't think I'd do that. You can't tell what sort of person you might get mixed up with."

Frances smiled a little bitterly across the table.

"What does it matter?" she demanded scornfully. "What does it matter what one does? I'm nearly thirty years old, and half the good times I might have had in life I haven't had because there have been things connected with them which one shouldn't do, or isn't supposed to do. I'm fed up with it, Edith. You come and look after my chickens for a time and see how you'd feel."

"It's out of doors," Miss Brown argued, "it's a healthy life and a beautiful country."

"Oh, shut up!" was the curt rejoinder. "Don't be

grandmotherly, Edith. You live much more intensively than I do — you could even have a secret and keep it," she added, with a note of aggrieved meaning in her tone — "but we're made of the same stuff really. We're neither of us content — at least I know I'm not, and I don't think you are, although you're too modest to ask yourself why. I've made a conquest, and I'm going to be asked to dance. I'm not quite sure about him, but there doesn't seem to be any one else."

Miss Brown looked critically across at the opposite table, and permitted herself a slight frown of disapproval. Two men had been dining there alone, and the one to whom Frances had evidently alluded was already upon his feet, straightening his tie with obvious self-consciousness. He was a big man with a florid complexion and unruly hair. His evening clothes fitted him badly, and he had the air of being in ill accord with his surroundings. Nevertheless, notwithstanding his coarseness of feature and somewhat pompous carriage, there was power of a sort in his face, in his straight, full mouth, shaggy eyebrows, and firm jaw. His companion was of an altogether different type. He was much younger; he wore tortoise-shell-rimmed spectacles, and he presented a thoughtful, almost a scholarly appearance. His connection with the other man was hard to divine.

"I don't care much for your admirer," Miss Brown confessed.

"Neither do I particularly," Frances agreed. "He doesn't look as though he could dance very well either. However, he seems to be my fate."

He was already indeed approaching their table. He concealed his lack of poise by a casualness of manner which bordered upon familiarity.

"Young lady care to dance?" he suggested, standing in front of Frances and looking down at her.

She rose to her feet after a moment's genuine hesitation. Miss Brown followed them with curious eyes. The man danced well enough in somewhat lumbering fashion, and was apparently ready of speech now the ice was broken.

Then Miss Brown's attention was called to her own affairs. The younger man had risen from his place and approached her. There was no awkwardness about his manner — rather a charming smile as he bowed slightly.

"I am so sorry," he said, "that I cannot follow my friend's example. I unfortunately do not dance. I wondered whether you would permit me to sit with you for a moment whilst you are alone?"

Even Miss Brown could find nothing to object to in the suggestion. She rather liked the young man's tone and manner too.

"Please do," she begged. "I am so glad for my friend to be able to dance. I suppose it is the custom in these places nowadays," she went on tentatively, "to dance without an introduction?"

The young man smiled gravely.

"I imagine so," he agreed. "To tell you the truth I do not frequent this type of restaurant very much. It was necessary for me to have a talk upon affairs with my friend, and as he has to go to Manchester early to-morrow morning we decided to dine together. I am afraid if the choice had been left to me I should have taken him to my club. He had a different idea, however. Is this a favourite place of yours?"

"I have been here twice before, when my friend has been up from the country," Miss Brown replied. "We have never danced though."

"Hard luck on you that I'm such a duffer," the young man remarked. "A great deal of my work has to be done

at night. I have to be down at the House of Commons with my Chief."

"That sounds very interesting."

"My work is interesting," he admitted. "I'm private secretary to Abel Deane."

Miss Brown's forehead was slightly puckered. She looked across at him doubtfully.

"Isn't Mr. Deane the leader of the Communist Party?" she enquired.

He nodded assent.

"And a very excellent leader, too," he declared, "although I say it who am his secretary. I suppose you think communism sounds very terrible?"

"I don't like what I have heard about it," Miss Brown confessed.

"Naturally. Yet the principles of communism appeal to some even amongst the most intelligent. I was at Oxford and I was fortunate enough to take quite an exceptional degree. I was certainly reckoned amongst the intellectuals, and although of course no creed of life can be altogether satisfactory, I am content to call myself a Communist. I know every one is frightened of the name, but ten years ago it was the same if one ventured to call oneself a Socialist. Yet the Socialists have had their turn at governing the country, and haven't done so badly."

"They only governed on sufferance," Miss Brown ventured. "One doesn't know what they would have done with a free hand."

"The restraint imposed by an opposition is one excellent feature of our system of government," the young man pointed out. "By the bye, my name is Greatson — Eric Greatson. And yours?"

"Brown."

"Just Miss Brown?"

"Miss Edith Brown."

"We can now consider ourselves introduced," the young man declared. "As I presume your friend and my companion, Frankland, are in the same happy position, I wonder whether you would allow us to have our chairs moved here? It would be a great kindness to me. Frankland and I have arrived at an *impasse* in our conversation, and we shall probably fall out if we go further."

"We shall be very glad to have you join us," Miss Brown acquiesced.

The young man gave the waiter the necessary order.

"You spoke of your friend as Mr. Frankland," Miss Brown went on. "Is he also a Communist?"

Her companion nodded.

"Secretary to the Miners' Federation," he confided, "and M. P. for Middleton, a very important person in his own districts. He is one of those few people who know exactly what to say to men of his own class. He can get an audience all worked up quicker than any one I know."

"And is he honest?"

The young man smiled dubiously.

"Well," he pointed out, "as Mr. Frankland is a member of my political party I could scarcely answer a question like that, could I? I wonder what made you ask it?"

Miss Brown knew very well why she had asked it, but her blue eyes had never looked more guileless.

"I wondered about his expression," she said. "Here they come!"

Mr. Frankland, and apparently Frances, approved of the new arrangement, and, although Miss Brown refused, Frances accepted a liqueur. At close quarters, her late partner was a little overpowering.

"Fine dancer, your young lady friend!" he remarked to Miss Brown, as he sipped his brandy. "I'm a trifle on the energetic side myself, want a little toning down.

Pity you don't dance, young fellow," he went on, turning to Greatson in a patronizing manner.

"I shall have lessons some day," the latter replied. "If I could get Miss Brown to teach me now ——"

"You would never learn anything at all," she assured him. "I have no idea of dancing like my friend. She is supposed to be very good indeed."

"So good," Frances scoffed, "that I dance about once a month, and sometimes then to the gramophone with Mollie."

"That country life that you've been telling me about's no good to you," Mr. Frankland declared vigorously. "I bet we'd find you something better to do than that up in London. Chickens! Why, the whole world's trying to run chicken farms nowadays. Can't imagine why people aren't a little more original."

"We can't all be Communist Members of Parliament, and plan revolutions," Frances observed.

"Who said anything about revolutions?" Frankland demanded brusquely. "That isn't our way of thinking at all, and if I had to rely upon my salary as an M. P., I should be in a pretty mess. What about it once more, Miss Frances, eh?" he added, laying down his cigarette.

Frances rose to her feet.

"Yes, we'll dance if you like," she consented, "but my name is Austin — Miss Austin."

Frankland chuckled but his protest died away at the sight of something in his companion's expression.

"All right," he conceded, a little sulkily. "It's going to be 'Miss Frances' though before very long. And afterwards 'Frances'."

"You may be a prophet," she acknowledged, "but I prefer intimacies to be arrived at by stages, and I am going to ask you not to hold me quite so tightly," she added.

He whispered a clumsy compliment in her ear as they moved away. Miss Brown fancied that she caught an expression of distaste in the face of her *vis-à-vis*.

"I suppose your friend Mr. Frankland is a very clever man," she remarked. "I am afraid I do not like him much."

"He is scarcely to be judged from a social point of view," was Greatson's apologetic comment.

"I suppose he has a great deal of power," Miss Brown reflected. "Isn't it he who will decide whether this terrible series of strikes comes off?"

"Not he alone. There are the Trades Unions to be considered, you know. There are grave differences of opinion between them and some of the Communist leaders. It depends entirely upon whether they come together or not what happens."

"And will they come together?"

The young man shook his head reproachfully.

"I cannot answer a question like that, Miss Brown," he replied. "It is very seldom indeed that I discuss politics with any one."

"But surely it doesn't matter with me?" she protested.

He took off his spectacles and wiped them. Then he looked at her earnestly.

"There are members of my party," he assured her, "who would think that I was doing a very indiscreet thing by even sitting at a table with Miss Edith Brown of Shepherd's Market."

Miss Brown was genuinely astonished.

"Good gracious, why?" she exclaimed, her blue eyes wide open. "What can you or any member of your party know about me?"

The young man smiled — not at all a displeasing smile.

"Even the cult of espionage," he observed cryptically, "has profited during the last few years by all these sci-

entific discoveries. It is difficult nowadays to avoid knowledge."

Miss Brown on the whole stood the shock well. She had become at once very much on her guard.

"But I am only a typist," she protested. "I count for nothing. I know nothing whatever about politics. I seldom even read the papers."

He smiled at her once more.

"Let me make a guess," he said. "I would surmise that up till an early hour yesterday afternoon your statement would have been unreservedly true. Since then you have fulfilled other functions."

"What do you mean?" Miss Brown demanded, her heart beating a little more quickly.

"You have associated yourself definitely with a certain cause," he continued, "and at considerable personal risk and with a certain amount of ingenuity you have carried out a difficult commission. Having gone so far who knows how much further you may go?"

"So you belong to those people who have set spies to watch an insignificant person like me," Miss Brown scoffed.

"That is all outside my province," the young man assured her. "There is no institution in the world to-day which has not its secret service in one form or another. Naturally there is one attached to my political party, but it is only by the merest chance that I happened to know anything about their present activities. As I do, however," he went on, twisting his fingers nervously, "may I give you a word of advice?"

"It certainly seems to me," Miss Brown declared ingenuously, "that I shall need advice from some one or other soon."

"You have accomplished your mission, and you have no doubt — I hope you have — been well paid for it. Let it go at that. If those people want to make use of you

again, don't let them. Our own people are pretty clever, or they wouldn't have known all about you, but they are also, I am afraid, terribly unscrupulous, and though we seem to be living in law-abiding times, the whole world is bristling underneath. Keep out of it all, Miss Brown. Stick to your typing, and mind you this is very serious advice, put a seal upon your lips — forget."

He rose to his feet.

"Are you going?"

"I am afraid I must ask you to excuse me," he regretted. "I am due down at the House of Commons in ten minutes, and one of the first duties of a secretary, you know, is punctuality. Will you remember my advice, Miss Brown?"

"I will try," she promised.

"And those dancing lessons?"

She shook her head.

"It would be a case of the blind leading the blind."

"Nevertheless," he threatened, "I fear that you are going to find me a somewhat persistent person."

He took his leave gracefully, with even a touch of wistfulness in his farewell smile. Miss Brown sat alone and wondered about many things. In the lounge, beyond the little crowd of dancers, she caught a glimpse of Frances' pale profile. Mr. Frankland, redder than ever, obviously eloquent, was leaning forward from a chair by her side, engaged in earnest conversation.

CHAPTER VI

Miss Brown remained demurely at the table to all appearance an interested spectator of the dancing and the general merriment. As a matter of fact her recent conversation had carried her back to a very different world. She felt a sudden shivering revulsion to the gaiety by which she was surrounded, the clamorous music, the hubbub of conversation, the continual popping of corks. Against her will her thoughts had been transported to those vivid and very different hours through which she had recently passed. The curtain rolled up before her. She was back again in the hard leather chair in the disordered room with the dead man behind the screen and the dying man confiding to her brain and fingers the achievement of his life. She heard the dry phrases recounting his day by day struggle, always the flame of his life flickering in the winds of death, a thousand menacing dangers against a single person whose sole weapons were courage, iron will, iron self-control. At that moment the whole adventure came back to her so vividly that she felt that word by word, page by page, she could have transscribed from memory scene after scene of that epic of secret history. She forgot entirely during that very brief lapse that she was Miss Brown, the modest little typist of Shepherd's Market. Her feet were planted in a greater and more terrible world, the atmosphere she breathed seemed spiced with danger and to savour of life and death. And then it all faded away like a flash. She looked up with a start, suddenly aware that a man was standing by her table.

"Will you dance with me, please?" he begged.

For a moment, too surprised to answer, she found herself looking at him speechless. He was tall, thin, very pale, with a sad and thoughtful face which in those few seconds seemed somehow familiar to her. He was not a person of whom it seemed possible to be for a moment afraid, yet with her new-born suspicion of strangers, Miss Brown, when she found words, was uncompromising in her refusal.

"Thank you very much," she said. "I do not dance often. I am quite content to wait for my friend."

He made no movement to depart. His fingers were twitching. He leaned lower over the table.

"You need not mind dancing with me," he confided. "I am a professional dancer here and I am paid to dance with ladies who have no partner, but it is not only that — I wish to speak to you."

"You too!" she exclaimed curiously. "What do you wish to speak about? Is there something you want to buy or steal from me?"

He flushed a little. From his careful choice of words and a slight, unrecognisable accent, she realised that he must be a foreigner.

"What I should more naturally wish," he told her, "would be to help you from those who desire to buy or steal your trust. Will you dance, please, then we might talk without being overheard?"

Miss Brown considered the matter. She had schooled herself not to trust to appearances, but if ever a young man looked honest, this one did. She rose hesitatingly to her feet, and from that moment his undoubted skill and the music took charge of affairs. She danced with a rare and ever increasing pleasure. When after two encores the music stopped, she was breathless. She glanced towards her table, realised that Frances had not returned, and suffered herself to be led to a recess of the room in

which were several easy-chairs. She waited until they were both ensconced and then faced him squarely.

"Now tell me," she insisted, "what you know about me and why you spoke to me as you did?"

"I know that you are Miss Edith Brown," he said, "a stenographer living in Shepherd's Market, and that you were with Colonel Dessiter for several hours last evening."

She was frankly puzzled. It seemed to her that she had stumbled into a world in which strange things were always happening, but that this young man should have known of her adventure in Lombertson Square was a little more than ordinarily incomprehensible. She had arrived in a fog and left in a furniture van, and she could scarcely have been absolutely recognised from any description, even if there had been any one to describe her.

"You must tell me how you know that," she begged.

He hesitated.

"I would rather not answer your question definitely. Will you let me tell you this? Colonel Dessiter has always been the friend of my family. I have had a message from him lately. I know, you see, that you have come into this great struggle, and there is something I want very much to say to you."

She stole a glance up at him. He was very big and, but for the remains of his military training and a probably inherited ease of bearing, would have been a little clumsy. His eyes were as brown as hers were blue, his features irregular, his hair stubborn. He was distinctly pleasant to look at without being handsome according to any accepted standards.

"I am a Russian," he announced.

She drew a little away.

"And therefore an exile and a bitter enemy of those who have destroyed my country," he went on.

She flushed with a momentary self-consciousness. She

had a feeling that he was sensitive and that her slight movement of revulsion had hurt him.

"I am like many other of my countrypeople," he explained, "engaged in a struggle to earn my living. At night I dance here; in the daytime I serve at a restaurant. The hours which are my own I devote to another cause. It was that cause which once brought me into touch with Colonel Dessiter."

There were so many questions she would have liked to ask, but, notwithstanding her conviction as to his honesty, she dared not. She remained, therefore, silent and unresponsive, and she could see that he was disappointed.

"It was chance," he continued, after a brief pause, during which each had seemed to be listening to the music — "chance entirely which brought you, Miss Brown, from that very quiet life which I am sure that you led in Shepherd's Market, into this ghastly struggle. To you the situation must be incredibly difficult. You do not know who are your friends and who are your enemies, but I want to ask you this: do you know who your companions of this evening are? Do you know the name of the man who sits now with your friend, and who he is?"

"Not before they came and asked us to dance," Miss Brown replied hastily, a little flush of colour again mounting to her cheeks. "I feel that it was indiscreet that we should have allowed them to come to the table, but you must believe me, it was for my friend's sake. She lives in the country and she is very lonely."

"She is very beautiful," the young man sighed.

"She is my dearest friend," Miss Brown continued. "It is for her sake that we came here this evening. When this man asked her to dance she consented. Then the other came and sat down at my table. I could scarcely prevent him. He behaved very nicely and it was he who told me who they were."

"The young man who talked to you," he confided, "is worthy of all respect. He would be an honest enemy or an honest friend, and if ever the Communist Party — the respectable section of them, that is to say — attain any real power in this country it will be his Chief who leads. But the other man — I could find, Miss Brown, no good word to say of him."

"How do you know so much about these things?" she asked curiously. "You are not an Englishman."

"Miss Brown," he explained, "it is not Englishmen alone who are concerned in the great upheaval which threatens, even though England should be chosen to be its theatre. I ask you, mind, for no confidences. I give you all of mine. We exiled Russians are banded together to work for our country's restoration. We have formed a society with that object. We are, alas, not kindly considered by many of our race, especially that portion who have chosen France and the French Riviera for their homes, because we do not seek the restoration of Tzardom. We wish for our country sane and free government, very much after the fashion of your English government, but with a president, such a man as Kerensky might have become, instead of a monarch. This does not weary you?"

"It interests me very much indeed," Miss Brown declared truthfully.

"In the great struggle which Colonel Dessiter had the genius to foresee, the scum of my country, those against whom our society is formed, are the leading movers. Therefore we are in spirit your allies. Where we are able to help, as I have helped Colonel Dessiter, is in private information from Russia. It is I who put into his hands certain facts concerning Frankland's last visit to Moscow, certain agreements at which he arrived with the Soviet Government, which, if known to the world before the storm bursts, must mean the end of that very

dreadful person. I may be telling you what lies locked in the cells of your brain."

"In my transcription," Miss Brown confided, "names were never mentioned, only numbers. Attached to my sheet is a key."

"That is like Dessiter," the young man acknowledged. "I have told you this, Miss Brown, because I wish you to understand that it was a shock to me to see this man at your table and to see him dancing with your very beautiful friend."

She looked him in the face.

"Tell me your name, please," she begged.

"My name is Paul," he told her. "We who have lost our country have no further right to our names. You can call me Paul, or Mr. Paul, if you like."

"Then Mr. Paul, please listen for a moment," she went on, with a slight emphasis upon the "Mr." "You seem to me honest — I have no doubt you are — and I thank you very much for your confidence. I do not think, however, that I wish to talk any more about these subjects. Therefore will you please take me back to my table and say good evening?"

He detained her gently.

"One moment, if you please," he begged. "I do not ask for your trust yet, though some day you will be willing to give it to me, but this one question I must ask, otherwise I should know nothing for days. You must tell me because it means much to all sane people. Have you so far succeeded? Is your packet safe?"

She considered the matter of a reply for several seconds, and decided favourably.

"It is safe," she confided, "and that is all I wish to say about it."

There was a sudden immense relief in his face, a lessening of the strain. He drew a deep sigh.

"Wonderful Miss Brown!" he murmured.

"There is nothing wonderful about me at all," she assured him.

"Any adventures?"

She showed him her wrist.

"There were three men in Shepherd's Market," she began — "but there, I would so much rather not talk about it."

"Then you shall not," he promised, trying to check her rising to her feet. "I will speak of something else. You have made enemies, you have already an army of enemies. There are friends waiting for you. I should be so happy if you would know my mother and father and sister who are all here in London. They were always friends of Colonel Dessiter."

"You are very kind," she acknowledged, "but I have no time for friendships."

He smiled a little wistfully. He had a very big mouth but somehow or other the smile was a pleasant thing.

"It is not much I should ask," he pleaded. "My mother and father keep a restaurant not very far from here. Would you come and lunch one day, and bring your beautiful friend? You would get plain food which I should serve to you myself, but it is a place you might like, and you would be amongst those who are anxious to become your friends."

"You are sure," she asked him ruthlessly, "that there is nothing more you want to find out from me?"

He smiled again into her blue eyes.

"My dear Miss Brown," he assured her, "it is we who could tell you a great deal more than you could tell us. I am convinced that there are many things which you do not even now understand and which I could explain. It is better though that you remain ignorant. The time might come at any moment when one of us might be of help to

you. I should speak to you like this in any case," he went on — " I know that if Colonel Dessiter were here he would approve — but apart from it all I shall make a confession. It would give me great pleasure to meet your beautiful companion of this evening."

Miss Brown nodded sympathetically. Notwithstanding the wall of reserve which she had built up and the suspicions she had tried to foster, she liked this young man and she was always pleased when any one admired Frances.

" Very well then," she promised, " we will come to lunch one day."

He drew a card from his pocket, scribbled an address upon it and handed it to her.

" Come not later than one o'clock, if you can," he begged. " Sometimes we run out of food and we have not much capital to buy more than we are sure of selling. When will you come? "

" Whenever you like."

" To-morrow? "

" I think that I could come to-morrow," she assented. " I am not sure about Frances."

He stood up.

" We will dance once more, yes? " he suggested.

It had been a wonderful evening, the two girls decided in the taxicab on the way home — a final extravagance upon which Miss Brown had insisted. Mr. Noel Frankland towards the end had become just a little too noisy and persistent, and Frances had suddenly tired of him. Nevertheless she leaned back in her corner with an air of content as they left the place.

" It's been great fun," she murmured lazily. " I'm glad I came up. What were you and that big Russian talking about for so long, Edith? "

"How did you know that he was a Russian?"

"Mr. Frankland told me. He is a professional dancer. You knew that, I suppose."

"Naturally. He told me so when he asked me to dance."

"Whatever did you find to talk about all the time?" Frances persisted.

Miss Brown hesitated.

"I found him interesting," she said. "His father and mother keep a restaurant and I have promised to take you there for lunch."

"Why me?"

"Because I think the most personal thing he said was that he found you very lovely, and he didn't like to see you dancing with Mr. Noel Frankland."

Frances laughed softly.

"They must hate one another, those two, for some reason or other. Mr. Frankland wasn't very polite about him."

"I should think politeness, in any case, was not one of Mr. Frankland's strong points," Miss Brown remarked a little drily.

Frances was silent for a moment.

"I should say he had no manners," she declared — "a rough, ill-bred, domineering person. I shivered when he tried to kiss me in the lounge. I have hated myself ever since because I wasn't sure what sort of a shiver it was."

"You are talking rubbish, Frances," was her friend's severe admonition. "You know perfectly well that you would never allow a man like that to touch you."

Frances made no reply. She was looking out of the window, watching the thin stream of people hurrying along Piccadilly.

Arrived in their little room, Miss Brown, who was developing watchful habits, looked around searchingly.

They had locked everything up when they left, but somehow or other the arrangement of the furniture seemed slightly altered, a vase of flowers upon the small typewriting desk had certainly been moved. Miss Brown hurridly unlocked the drawer in which she kept her few valuables and where she had left the manuscript which she was transcribing for the young man in Hampstead. It was still there, but turned upon its face and doubled up as though by some impatient hand. Underneath it, dragged out from a hidden corner where she had secreted them, were her cheque book and pass book. She gave a little shiver. They would know now for certain, these people, whoever they might be, where the treasure lay. She crossed the room and drew the bolt which fortune had provided.

"What's wrong?" Frances asked, yawning as she sat on the edge of the bed and kicked off her shoes.

Miss Brown was the last person in the world whom one would have associated with a life of deceit or the telling of untruths. Nevertheless her reply was perfectly natural.

"I couldn't remember for a moment," she confided, "where I had left my young Hampstead novelist's manuscript."

CHAPTER VII

At half-past twelve on the following morning, Miss Brown walked up Shaftesbury Avenue on the way to keep her luncheon engagement. At twenty minutes to one she had found the place — a tiny building painted white in a back street off Soho, with green blinds, the sign of an eagle hanging outside, and underneath a few words in an unintelligible language. She pushed open the door and stood for a moment looking in. The restaurant consisted of a small room with a dozen tables or so around the walls, one or two in the centre and a space large enough for at the most three musicians upon a raised dais at the further end. The tables were innocent of linen cloths but they were spotlessly clean with a fresh supply of paper napkins and brightly polished glass tastefully arranged. There were a few flowers in the centre of each and a menu written by hand. Already half a dozen people were lunching, and as Miss Brown stood doubtfully upon the threshold, her companion of the night before came hurrying through a door carrying a brown pot of steaming soup. Without any sign of embarrassment he set it down for a moment whilst he came to greet her. She fancied that she caught a shadow of disappointment in his face as he looked over her shoulder.

"I am so glad that you could come," he said, "but your friend — I do not see her."

"She had to go back to her chickens," Miss Brown regretted. "I was not at all sure whether I should come alone."

"It was very foolish of you to hesitate," he assured her severely. "Will you please sit there," he added, indicat-

ing a table. "I will come directly and ask you what you would like to eat."

Miss Brown seated herself a little shyly at a corner table. Mr. Paul caught up the pot of soup again and carried it to a table where three men, each with a pale coloured *apéritif* in front of him, were smoking cigarettes and waiting. A tall, grey-haired lady who was seated at the desk, descended and crossed the floor.

"It is Miss Brown, I am sure," she said, smiling graciously. "My son has spoken of you. I do not speak English well, but I wish to bid you welcome."

Miss Brown had risen to her feet. She accepted the hand which was offered to her and resisted an insane desire to effect some sort of reverence.

"You will understand," Madame continued, "that we are a little family party here, just our friends and a few relatives. It is my husband there at the end of the room, talking with the General — General Dovolitz — who lunches here every day. And my daughter, when she has finished helping in the kitchen, will play the piano. You must dine with us one night. It is perhaps gayer. The place seems more warm when the lights are lit, but we are glad always to see our friends."

Madame departed with a smile, and Miss Brown sat down. Presently Paul appeared with a menu which he presented with a bow.

"You will understand," he explained, "that you are to-day the guest of the house. Afterwards you can patronize us if you will. You are one of those whom we shall always be glad to welcome. For this morning I recommend a few sardines of a mark which is a specialty of ours, some goulash — that is really a Hungarian dish, but served in the Russian fashion — and some fruit. It will do?"

"It sounds delightful."

"For wine I shall give you a little carafe of *vin rosé*. Wine is where we Russians are at fault. We understand food so well, but in drinking we have only the taste for spirits. You will excuse?"

He hurried off to speak to an impatient customer, cast a watchful eye around the room and presently reappeared with the sardines.

"Your mother has spoken to me," Miss Brown told him. "I think she is delightful."

He bowed gravely.

"Presently my father will pay his respects," he announced. "He lunches always with an old friend. They are at the bottom of the room there. And my sister, too, you must meet. As soon as she is free from the kitchen she plays the piano. At night we sometimes have much music ——"

Miss Brown started a little in surprise at the sudden change in his expression, the fiercely muttered exclamation, obviously in his own language. She looked around. A man had entered the place, hung his hat upon a peg and, crossing the room, had seated himself with much assurance at the next table. He had the closely shaven head and bristling moustache of the foreigner, but he had also an air of prosperity which most of them lacked. Paul, with a couple of strides, stood by the table of this evidently unwelcome visitor. He addressed him first in a language which she judged to be Russian, then, failing to elicit a response, in English.

"I am sorry, sir, but that table is engaged."

The man folded up his newspaper and rose.

"Very well," he conceded, "I will sit at another."

"I regret, sir," was the curt rejoinder, "that every table is engaged."

They looked at one another: the newcomer expressionless, with a certain sarcastic smile at the corners of his

lips; Paul, with less restraint, showing signs of violent anger.

"It is against the law," the former remarked, "for you to keep a restaurant and refuse to supply food and drink."

"Then I will break the law," Paul declared with his hand already upon the other's chair. "Every table here is promised. There is no room for you, no place under this roof. Eat elsewhere — and may your food choke you! In the meantime be so good as to leave."

The man shrugged his shoulders.

"You are foolish," he expostulated. "I am a fellow countryman. I might become a good client."

"You cannot be a fellow countryman," Paul retorted, "because I have no country. You will save trouble, I hope."

The man rose to his feet, folded up his paper once more, took down his hat with a final glance around, during which his eyes rested for a second or two upon Miss Brown, and passed out into the street. Miss Brown looked after him curiously.

"Why did you do that?" she asked.

Paul seemed short of breath.

"He was a spy. A Russian truly enough, but a Russian of to-day. Forgive me if I say no more. These are business hours and one must work. The luxury of feeling is for another time."

He hurried off. During the course of her luncheon — a plain but very excellent one — Miss Brown watched him exchanging greetings with practically every one in the room. The clients of the place seemed all habitués. Most of them were a little shabby, most of them had a more or less poverty-stricken air. There was very little wine drunk and fewer liqueurs. Occasionally there was a whispered consultation with Madame at the desk and a

note was made of an amount to be paid some time in the future. On each of these occasions, Paul seemed to become more depressed. Towards two o'clock, when the place was nearly empty, a pale-faced girl with beautiful light-coloured eyes, not very tall, with broad shoulders and hips, and a very graceful presence, came through the side door, looked into the room and approached Edith.

"You are Miss Brown, I am sure," she said. "May I sit down for a moment? I am Paul's sister."

"Please do," Miss Brown begged with some diffidence. "I hoped you were going to play."

"I do sometimes," the girl replied. "To-day — forgive me — I am really too tired. Our kitchen maid could not come. It has been hard work. You are pleased with your luncheon, I hope?"

"It was quite wonderful!"

"We serve only simple things. If only every one would pay it would be all right with us, but my mother can resist no one, and my father is hopeless. They are all our friends who come, you see, our people who know about us, and we would like very much to earn a living by serving no others. My brother has spoken to me of you. Colonel Dessiter was a great friend. You will be always welcome."

"Your brother has been very kind," Miss Brown acknowledged. "I do not altogether know why, I am sure. It was only chance which made me acquainted with Colonel Dessiter. May I know your name, please?"

"My name is Naida," the girl confided. "I have no other. We lost our other names when we lost our country. If ever we regain it we shall remember them again. Tell me why Paul was so angry when he came into the kitchen a few minutes ago? He would answer no questions but he was muttering to himself all the time."

"Some guest came in whom he ordered out again. A

Russian too, I believe, but evidently some one of whom your brother did not approve."

The girl sighed.

"They spy on us all the time," she said. "They pretend that they are safe, that the country is prosperous, that they are going to bring the whole world to their way of thinking, they spend our money establishing international centres and secret service branches in every capital, and yet they fear us, they fear that sanity may come back once more to the people."

Paul, temporarily free, came across to them, bearing a dish of fruit.

"I remember that you do not smoke," he said to Miss Brown. "Perhaps you will try a tangerine. I went to the market to search for them this morning before five o'clock. It is very hard to get fruit which is agreeable and that one can afford to give. I am glad that my sister has found you out."

The latter rose to her feet.

"I must go and see if Mother needs help," she announced with a kindly little nod of farewell.

"Won't you sit down, please, Mr. Paul?" Miss Brown invited timidly. "You look so tired."

"I am tired," he admitted. "It is a terrible confession for one so big and strong as I, isn't it? But then, you see, I danced until one o'clock after a busy day here, and I was in the market at dawn to see if I could save a little on the things we buy. Will you forgive me if I drink a small glass of brandy?"

"Please do," she begged.

He went to a narrow counter upon which was ranged an array of bottles, helped himself and returned.

"Miss Brown," he said earnestly, "I should like you to understand all about us. I tried to tell you a little last night but it was difficult. I am sure that when you

have confidence we can be of service to one another. You must know," he went on thoughtfully, "more than any other person breathing, more than the English Home Secretary or any of his agents, far more than Scotland Yard, of this terrible conspiracy. Dessiter had picked up the threads — that I know — from China and Australia to Rome. Yours will need to be a charmed life, Miss Brown."

"I am not afraid," she assured him, without a tremor in her voice. "Only I do not understand, Mr. Paul, of what service I could ever be to you. Even if I knew all that you say, you know quite well that no word, no single word, could I or would I ever utter even to you who have been kind, even to you whom I might trust — that would make any difference."

He nodded.

"That is just how I would have you feel," he approved. "Yet you may find, as I said, as time goes on, that we can help one another."

"What I must confess that I should like to understand," practical Miss Brown confided, "is how you knew about me."

He smiled.

"I can afford to be much more frank with you than you can with me," he declared. "I was at Lombertson Square after you had left it. I saw Dessiter for a moment or two before the doctor came. He told me — everything."

"So that was why you were in Shepherd's Market yesterday morning!" she exclaimed. "I thought I recognised you when you spoke to me last night. It was you who knocked down that brute who nearly got the satchel. Why did you hurry off when the policeman came?"

"I had done all that was necessary," he answered. "I did not wish to be recognised there."

"If you had not been so quick," she said gratefully, "I think that man would have wrenched my arm out."

"Then I am very glad, because it is a very nice arm. Now you know why I recognised you last night. I was watching to see you come out so that I should know you whenever we met. If Dessiter had lived through the night I am certain that he would have sent you word that I was to be treated as a friend. However, in time I shall convince you of that."

"I think of you as one already," Miss Brown assured him. "I was very interested in the little you told me about yourself. Have you time to go on?"

"It is a very simple story," he said. "To begin by repeating what I told you last night — my family, my sister, my father, my mother and myself and some others of us are not content to do what so many of our exiled Russians have done. They are living in luxury, many of them; on the Riviera, in Paris, even in New York, living on their titles, on their prestige, upon the charity and sympathy of the world. That does not suit us. We have lost our country, and there is much blame to be attached to us for that. When we lost our country, we lost our names, we lost everything except our souls. Those we have kept. The flame of our will still burns, and I tell you even now that that poisonous race of men, who are attempting to corrupt the world, fear us. They have a secret service which costs them millions. We, just a few of us, have a secret service which costs us nothing, but when we move they are panic-stricken. There is not one of them who could not be bought. There is not one of us whose life would not be freely and joyously given rather than a single one of our plans or our secrets should be disclosed. I risk nothing in making you my confidant to this extent, Miss Brown, even if I did not trust you, because this much they know themselves. We are of those few who do not accept things as they stand. We are the Russians of Russia, far removed from that floating scum

of the world who live on our lands and in our cities. There is no drifting down the tide of easy ways for us. We fight for the damnation of those who have brought about this holocaust."

"You have hope?" she asked eagerly.

"Why not? When, in the world's history, did a régime, a scheme of government, founded upon mud, built over a cesspool, endure? Given long enough time that present country which calls itself Russia must collapse of its own accord. It is our wish to hasten that time so that it may come before we are too old to taste the joy of feeling the soil of our homeland once more beneath our feet. It is for that we work, hour after hour, and week after week, work for our livings in the daylight, work for our country in the hours of quiet."

He finished his brandy and stood up.

"I have work now in the kitchen," he announced. "We have not a great quantity of china or cutlery, and everything must be prepared for the service of dinner this evening."

"And afterwards you dance?" she asked wonderingly.

"And afterwards I dance," he assented. "Sometimes perhaps my footsteps are a little heavy, but they do their business all the same. I want you to know, Miss Brown, that whilst you are now, and will be until you can be released of your trust, surrounded by enemies, you have also friends. Listen. I will give you a proof that I have told you the truth, that I was at Lombertson Square last night. Behind the screen ——"

He leaned forward and whispered. Miss Brown was back again amidst the horrors.

"You saw the paragraph in the paper this morning?" he went on. "That was all. There will be no more than that. It was I who helped to move him — and the fog, which made it easy. There will be no outcry, no word

of complaint to the police, but they know over there at Moscow that they have lost the best man who ever enlisted under their secret service, and they know well that Dessiter killed him. And over here — a man unknown! Perhaps. But even your police, though dull, are not fools; even your Home Department, though fettered by conventions, have learned how to muzzle the press at times. The name of that man was known in every city of the world. In Barcelona, in Moscow, Rome and Paris, Bucharest and Shanghai, they wear mourning for him. There will be a black edge round their paper, but his name will never be mentioned. That is how these men slip out of the world."

"It doesn't sound like real life," Miss Brown mused.

"There is a great deal in life," Paul told her, "of which the multitudes never dream. And now, I must go. Please come here when you can to eat. You are of our circle. You will be welcome."

Miss Brown held out her hand, a little startled at feeling it raised to his lips. Afterwards she went timidly with her purse in her hand to the desk where Madame presided, but Madame shook her head.

"To-day you are my son's guest," she said. "I hope you have enjoyed your luncheon? Whenever you care to come back we shall be glad to see you. At another time you must meet my husband. To-day he is a little excited. He talks politics with General Dovolitz — and that often upsets him."

Miss Brown took her leave, feeling somehow or other as though she had left the presence of royalty, instead of having been bidden farewell by a lady with a cash register from behind the desk of a small eating house. Upon the threshold, to her surprise, she met Paul. A black overcoat covered his conventional waiter's garb and he held a bowler hat in his hand.

"A friend who has a spare afternoon," he confided — "he is a cousin really, who was in my regiment during the war — has come in to wash the dishes. I am free therefore. You will permit that I accompany you home?"

"Wouldn't it do you more good to lie down?" she suggested. "You look so tired."

"I would like," he confessed, "to ride on the top of a 'bus with you."

She laughed softly. The enterprise appealed to her.

"For an hour," she agreed. "We will go to Hammersmith and back."

They found an omnibus, climbed on to the top and seated themselves side by side. They were in no respect an unusual-looking couple. They seemed indeed very much a part of the world which passes daily backwards and forwards from the travail of the City to the sporadic rest of the suburbs. Miss Brown was wearing her rather dingy mackintosh, a small black hat of some shiny material, suitable for wet weather, and gloves which she had intended to replace during an afternoon's shopping. Paul's overcoat had been bought ready-made in Holborn and he was by no means of stock size. His laced boots had been purchased with an idea of wear and his hat, with its thin nap and streaky edges, betrayed the spirit of economy in which it had been acquired. Nevertheless, Miss Brown's eyes shone blue with the spirit of enterprise, and Paul, as he removed his hat for a moment, showed the fine shape of his head, the strength of his jaw notwithstanding his rather prominent cheek bones, and the visionary light in his clear, strong eyes. For November there were fewer clouds about than usual, and a breeze that was almost soft.

"Well," he enquired abruptly, as they started on their way, "you have seen how we live — what do you think of us?"

"I think it is very wonderful," she declared, "and I think that you are all very brave."

"For one thing," he admitted soberly, "I am thankful. We have kept our spirit. There are those of our own family who would say that we had become outcasts. To them I reply that we have kept the gold of life. We shall keep it to the end. Those others, they are terrible. They who should be working made themselves only a few months ago an object of ridicule in the face of the world. They elected a tzar. My God, what mockery! There will never be another tzar of the Russians. There will be a ruler, but he will be one whom the people, when they have shaken themselves free from the loathsome yoke of the Soviet, shall choose for themselves. Now, we shall speak no more of politics. I would like you to tell me more about your friend."

"There isn't much to tell," Miss Brown confided. "She and I have both the same dull history. She was the daughter of a small country doctor, and I was the daughter of a struggling lawyer. Both suffered through the war, died and left no money. Frances tried living with relatives, but gave it up. She attempted a tea shop, but that became impossible. Now she has a small chicken farm, but I think that she is very miserable. She is too bright and clever to be buried in the country."

"And too beautiful," Paul murmured.

She saw a momentary wistfulness in his eyes, and sighed. Poor Mr. Paul, with a father and a mother and a sister to keep—a *maître d'hôtel* by day and a professional dancer by night! She struggled against a wave of melancholy.

"A holiday," she begged. "Just for a short time let us forget every one who is unhappy and think only of joyful things."

His smile was a little sad but he entered into her spirit.

"Tell me instead then," he begged, "just where you were brought up. Tell me under what sun you were born where the eyes are painted such a colour."

She laughed softly.

"That's better," she approved. "All my history, all that has happened to me up till last night, I could tell you before we reached the next lamp post."

"Your loves?"

"I have had none."

"Your ambitions?"

"I am much too practical to be a dreamer," she assured him.

He shook his head.

"You may have always thought so," he said, "but you were made for romance, and I think that romance has you now fairly in its grip. You will live through wonderful days, Miss Brown, before you go back again to the life you led before you sat upon the steps of Dessiter's house."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"It was very damp there," she murmured, "and the fog was horrible, and what followed terrified me more than I should like to confess, and yet I suppose you are right. I think I shall be glad all my life that I lost my way."

CHAPTER VIII

And then, without any warning, the world with which Miss Brown was engaged, seemed to drop back again to exactly where it had been before. For many days nothing whatever happened to disturb the serenity of her existence. Each morning, after she had scanned the personal column of the *Times*, she visited her clients in the various districts of the City, and during the afternoon she typed. There was nothing to remind her of that amazing incursion into the world of romance, except a curious sense which never left her that wherever she went she was never entirely alone. She had ceased to be the primly dressed little typist, the insignificant unit of humanity, carrying her satchel, generally holding an umbrella and going quietly and unobtrusively about her business. To some person or people she had become an object of interest. Always she fancied that in Shepherd's Market when she left her room in the morning, there were loiterers in the street who had an eye upon her. Sometimes she recognised the same man — her neighbour in the 'bus, perhaps, or in the tube — day after day. Sometimes it was a woman. Never before had so many people tried to enter into conversation with her. They were clever, these people who would have liked to have won a portion of her confidence. They had begun to realise her prim little code of propriety. No smartly dressed young man attempted the usual sort of casual flirtation. An elderly gentleman reading the *Times* would glance at her satchel and ask her kindly questions as to her occupation, with references to his own daughters about to earn their livings. A motherly looking old lady would begin to talk about her son who was a steady busi-

ness man always complaining of the frivolity of the modern flapper typist. Sometimes Miss Brown found it hard to resist their overtures. She was really a friendly little person, although she was developing with an effort a great gift of unresponsiveness. In time it seemed to her that these people came to understand the impossibility of scraping a casual acquaintance with her. Their direct efforts ceased although they still watched.

During this interval of waiting, Miss Brown struggled hard to attune that amazing tangle of underground history which remained always at the back of her mind with the day by day trend of affairs. She read of the abortive efforts of the hastily summoned coal commission to find some way of reconciling what seemed irreconcilable, the inflated demands of the miners on one side, and the obduracy of the capitalist on the other. She learnt by a judicious process of selective journalistic study to discriminate between the greedy dividend hunter to whom his toilers were as but machines, and the conscientious mine owner who knew perfectly well that, in many of the districts he controlled, the granting of the miners' demands would mean the shutting down of the pits for all time, unemployment for the rest of their lives for men useless in any other capacity, loss of trade to the country, loss of prestige. And behind the gathering storm were the sinister figures of certain of the Communist leaders, men who scoffed at the Trades Unions as an out-of-date and *bourgeois* tainted institution, who waved the red flag and talked openly, not only of strikes, but of revolution. These men and their agents were everywhere. In China another fierce struggle was in progress, inspired from Moscow, whose open programme was to drive British trade from eastern waters. All over the world emissaries of the International Communist Party were attacking every industry in which British trade was predominant.

The Secretary of the Seamen's Union was travelling from port to port preaching the rankest treason, and encouraging strikes even where the men themselves were satisfied. The struggle was no longer between the seamen and dockers represented by their Trades Unions and the shipping world. A far more sinister and malevolent body of men, whose numbers seemed all the time to multiply, had appointed themselves the people's champions and were at open war with all recognised forms of arbitration. Day by day Miss Brown realised more thoroughly what the publication of certain pages of her notebook would mean, and she grew impatient as time passed on. There was a section of the press which scoffed openly at the idea of any attempt at revolution, that arms would ever be shipped into England for that purpose, that any attempt at corrupting the Army or the Navy could possibly meet with any success. Miss Brown grew positively angry as she read. She knew of a ship now on its way from the Baltic with a very murderous cargo. She knew of a house in the very centre of a great military district, deemed above suspicion, from which the poison was streaming day by day, printing presses at Clerkenwell working night and day to provide the fuel for treason. She could guess dimly what might happen to Mr. Noel Frankland if a copy of that speech of his in Moscow should find its way to Whitehall. Every day, as she studied the situation in her sedate but intelligent fashion, she realised what an upheaval throughout the world must come when Colonel Dessiter's deadly stock of information should pass into the hands of the authorities. She resented the delay. With every hour of inaction the leaders of the men committed themselves more deeply, their language became more inflammatory and, what was worse, the numbers at their meetings more numerous. Two cartoons of the *Workers' Weekly* were condemned by the authorities, but neverthe-

less enjoyed an enormous circulation. One showed the great shops and provision markets sacked and empty; the other, the Governor of the Bank of England and a little company of pudgy millionaires walking through the City with sheaves of bank notes in their hands seeking to buy bread. And every morning, Miss Brown searched through the columns of the *Times* in vain.

Once or twice she went to lunch at Paul's restaurant, and on each occasion was warmly welcomed. It was Paul from whom she gained much of her information as to the trend of events, and one day, after long consideration, she asked him a question.

"Mr. Paul," she said, "you know about everything. Why am I not allowed to finish the task I began? Every day things throughout the country seem to become worse, the men's leaders are permitted to talk the rankest treason, and we do nothing."

He made her a sign of caution and later on came and sat at her table.

"You know what an anarchist is, Miss Brown?" he asked.

Miss Brown assented.

"I didn't understand properly until quite lately," she admitted. "I've been reading things up."

"An anarchist is a senseless, soulless machine of death," Paul declared, "but there is just one feature about him — the death he dispenses to others he does not fear for himself. There are about two hundred of them distributed about London, mostly low-class Russians and Spaniards. Abel Deane and the more respectable portion of the Communist Party give them the cold shoulder, but the others are willing enough to make use of them. They know very well the bank where the record of Dessiter's work is deposited. They watch it, even now, day and night. I can only conclude that the reason Dessiter's

political executors don't communicate with you is that they don't want any risk of the book being destroyed in a fight — and there would be a fight if any one attempted to fetch it away."

"Couldn't it be taken away in the night in a prison van or something?" Miss Brown asked.

"They could blow a prison van to pieces in two seconds," Paul replied — "make matchwood of it. Then there's another trouble."

He hesitated. Miss Brown's blue eyes were full of questioning.

"I have had a hint," he continued thoughtfully, "that the Communists have a spy planted in the bank. That is what makes the authorities reluctant to move."

"If they don't do something soon it will be too late," Miss Brown pointed out. "Do you know, Mr. Paul, I believe I could do nearly the whole of the work — the part of it that counted, I mean — from memory. I shouldn't use the same words, perhaps, but the sense of it all would be there."

"But where would you do it?" he asked.

"Where?" she repeated wonderingly.

He smiled.

"Don't you know," he asked her, "that no single movement on your part passes unrecorded? Those fellows have got tabs on you all the time. It is quite certain they know that you are lunching here to-day. One or two of them will escort you home, even though you may not realise it. The sound of your typewriter in that little bed-sitting-room of yours would bring them around you like locusts after honey."

"Surely they could find some safe place for me to work," Miss Brown protested with a little shiver.

"It is worth considering," Paul reflected. "And yet one must think of this: it is not alone the result of Des-

siter's work that is needed — it is the documents. It is their publication which is going to bring down the storm. What those documents may be I, alas, do not know, but I can guess. It was I who helped procure the report of Noel Frankland's speech in Moscow. If the Government decide to publish that, no one would believe any more that any one of the party has any idea of such a thing as a bloodless revolution. You have not read the report of that speech, Miss Brown? "

She shook her head.

"I did not look at any of the papers," she replied. "It was not necessary."

Paul tapped with his finger upon the table to emphasize his remarks.

"Frankland went too far even for him," he said. "I believe it is true that he has been what Englishmen call 'in a devil of a funk' ever since. He was filled with Russian champagne and he spoke to please them. He gave the actual names of five prominent Englishmen who he swore should be hung in front of their own houses and he wound up by saying he only hoped that he would be near enough to give the rope a pull."

"That horrible man!" Miss Brown murmured.

"You can realise now," Paul continued, "how angry I was when I saw him dancing with your friend. He is not a man she should know, Miss Brown. I wish you could persuade her of that. Could you not bring her here again? " he went on a little wistfully. "There is so much I should like to say to her."

Miss Brown studied him for a moment, and sighed ever so slightly. Somewhere buried in a corner of her heart the pain of her own brief hour of romance still lingered, yet she was young to pass all her life with the ashes of memory, and Paul was in his way attractive. She liked his drawn, serious face, his hesitating yet usually so cor-

rect speech, his deferential air. She liked, too, the smile which sometimes made him handsome.

"I will see what I can do," she promised, when she took her leave.

And as it happened on the very next evening, quite unexpectedly, Frances appeared. She made her usual gay and somewhat exuberant entrance, but she was pale and it seemed to her friend, watching her anxiously, that there were signs of trouble in her face.

"Tell me all the news, you mysterious little mouse," she invited, throwing off her hat, curling herself up on the bed and lighting a cigarette. "I've a whole budget myself."

"Nothing has happened up here," Miss Brown declared. "I have just done my work, gone to bed at night and got up in the morning. What's been happening with you?"

"Oh, no end of things," Frances declared, flicking the ash from the end of her cigarette — "mostly connected with our cosmopolitan acquaintance, Mr. Noel Frankland."

Miss Brown looked grave. There was nothing in her mind more certain than the fact that she disliked Mr. Frankland very much.

"Tell me everything, please," she invited.

"Well, he wrote and asked if he could motor down and see me, so I invited him to tea."

"Well?"

Frances made a little grimace. Her speech became slower. She spoke as though the subject were distasteful to her.

"He came twice — behaved in the usual fashion. The second time he told me that he was married."

"I shouldn't think," Miss Brown said soberly, "that that would matter very much to you except that under the circumstances he ought not to have come and called

upon you at all. Do you really think that he is a nice man, Frances? "

"Nice? Of course he isn't nice," was the impatient rejoinder. "I don't think that any men are nice nowadays. He told me that he was married in one breath and asked me to motor down to Hastings with him the next. He suggested Brighton first, but thought that Hastings might be quieter. And then he reminded me that he was a public man whose movements always attracted a great deal of attention."

"Beast!" Miss Brown exclaimed emphatically.

"Yes," Frances agreed. "I felt like that exactly. It's a good word and yet I wanted to go."

"You don't really like him?" Miss Brown gasped.

Frances threw away the end of her cigarette.

"I think, in a way, that he's detestable," she replied. "I understand him better than he thinks and that is the conclusion I have come to. He's coarse and he's domineering and he's almost humorously egotistical, but he has power, Edith, and a quaint impressive kind of virility. He makes me realise all the time that he's a man. Some of them don't."

"I hope that you're not going to see him again," Miss Brown said anxiously.

Frances shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know. When it comes to the pinch, you know, I'm rather finicky. I hate his ill-made clothes, his braggadocio, his ranting speeches. I hate all of them, but — I don't know whether you can understand this — he seems to bring with him such an atmosphere of vivid life, and I'm getting to hate my chickens like hell, Edith, — to wish I lived upon a hill or somewhere else. A muddy lane and some buildings with tin roofs, that is all I can see from my windows — and rain. It always rains. There are always long patches of flood in the meadow. The even-

ings there are horrible. I try to read — I can't. I think physically I'm too much alive to sit still and use my brain only. I want something for my eyes to rest upon with pleasure, music for my body to move to, warmth — we can only get a handful of coals down there in the country now since they have begun to talk about this strike — and plenty of light. Somehow or other whatever sort of lamp we buy seems to smoke and smell."

"Well, anyhow you're up for the night now, aren't you?" Miss Brown reminded her cheerfully. "We'll go out somewhere and have a good time. You haven't made any plans?" she added, with sudden anxiety.

"None at all," Frances assured her. "Mr. Frankland pressed me to say when I was coming up, but I haven't let him know. He thinks I'm down there struggling against my infatuation for him. And he's perfectly confident that in a few days I shall walk into his office — he has a private sitting room there, he keeps on telling me — and fall into his arms."

Miss Brown shivered. She was very delicately strung and there were times when her friend's plain speech revolted her.

"I haven't told you the rest of my news yet," Frances went on. "A Russian woman's been over to see me once or twice. They own the big house the other side of the village and come down to hunt two days a week. She is rather nice. You know all about her, I expect — the Princess Strepaff."

Miss Brown nodded.

"She writes very clever novels and she's a wonderful musician too. My young man down at Hampstead has a book of her husband's on sociology. They ought to make things more interesting for you, Frances — and they're worth while."

"They are only down two days a week, and they always

have such a crowd of people," Frances complained. "Anyway they've asked us both to a party to-night at their house in Chelsea."

"But how delightful for you! I couldn't possibly go, of course, but you'll love it. You may meet all sorts of interesting people."

"The curious part of it is, my dear, that you've got to go," Frances insisted. "They made a special point of it. I told them about you and that we shared a room here, and they were immensely interested. The last words the Princess said to me were 'not later than ten o'clock, and be sure you bring Miss Brown.' I wouldn't dare to go without you."

Miss Brown shook her head in some embarrassment.

"Frances dear," she confided, "I don't think I want to go. I can't tell you why, but there's really an excellent reason."

"Frock?"

"No. I suppose my black frock would do."

"Then you'll have to come and that's all there is about it. I think the Princess wants you to do some work for her."

Miss Brown reflected. She had had visions since her conversation with Paul of being abducted, of being tied hands and feet to her chair whilst bearded Russians applied inhuman tortures to induce her to part with what she remembered of the contents of her precious notebook. And yet she wasn't actually afraid. She knew very well how ridiculous any idea of the sort really was and the vision faded away. Her sense of humour triumphed, and she laughed softly to herself.

"If you want me to go very much, Frances," she said, "why, of course it might be fun. Do you mind dining with me at a little place I know of first?"

"I'll dine with you anywhere, my child," Frances as-

sented, " but for the love of God let's go and have a cocktail somewhere before we change."

" You wouldn't like some tea, would you? "

" I should hate it," was the emphatic reply. " I tried to drink some in the train coming up, and it nearly poisoned me. Besides, I've drunk tea every afternoon down at Meadowley. What a lot of things there are I'd like to strike right out of my life! Afternoon tea would be one of them. Come! We'll go round to the Ritz Grill Room."

" It's raining," Miss Brown ventured.

" We'll get wet if necessary," Frances declared, swinging herself off the bed and arranging her hat. " If you say another word, I shall drink two cocktails — or even three. Put on your nice drab little mackintosh and your shiny hat, and come along."

" I'm not sure that I approve of two spinsters wandering out in search of cocktails," Miss Brown remarked, as they started off.

Frances shook out her umbrella.

" Where shall we go to? " she asked. " Hatchard's or the Ritz? "

Miss Brown deliberated for a moment and decided in favour of the larger measure of respectability.

CHAPTER IX

The only occupant of the Ritz Grill-Room lounge, when the two girls made their somewhat tentative entrance, was Noel Frankland, lounging ungracefully in an easy-chair, with two empty glasses upon the table by his side and a third one half full in his hand. He rose to his feet at once and came forward to greet Frances, but he was obviously embarrassed.

"Why, what are you doing here to-night?" he demanded. "Who's feeding the chickens?"

"The chickens are all right," Frances answered, a little coldly. "I thought you were speaking at Leeds."

"You got it wrong," was the hurried reply. "That's to-morrow night — I mean the night after. I am having an early dinner here, and going to the theatre afterwards," he added, with a nervous glance over his shoulder.

"With your wife?"

"With the missus. Good thing I told you about her, wasn't it? Look here, what are you doing afterwards — to-morrow afternoon? Why can't you wander down and see my show then?" he suggested, lowering his voice as he bent towards Frances.

"I don't think I want to see your show, as you call it," Frances replied. "At the present moment we are dying for a cocktail. Come along, Edith. We'll sit in the corner there."

"Awfully sorry I can't ask you to join me," Mr. Frankland apologised uneasily, "but you see — well, there we are!"

He departed abruptly. A middle-aged woman of undistinguished appearance was standing in the doorway.

Frances gave one glance at her and then passed her arm through her friend's.

"I really don't know," she reflected, as they gave their order, "whether these men are so much to be blamed for their questing habits. Marriage is such a pig-in-the-poke, isn't it? A man can never know how a woman's going to turn out."

Miss Brown was unsympathetic.

"Mrs. Frankland, if that was she," she remarked, "seemed to me to be entirely of the same order of being as her husband. I don't like her appearance, and I don't like his, or his manner or his speech or his morals or anything about him."

"He's a common sort of brute," Frances mused. "I wonder why that type of man is sometimes attractive to a woman of superior instincts."

"I don't agree with you that he is," was Miss Brown's firm reply. "No woman of taste could be attracted by such a person. If I seriously believed that you were, Frances, I think it would be one of the greatest disappointments of my life."

Frances laughed with sudden good nature, and drank her cocktail.

"My dear, mine was only a general speculation. I'm in a queer mood these days. You mustn't take anything I say or do too seriously. Can't you realise, though, that there are times when one gets tired of one's own standards, of one's own good taste, of one's own nice habits? One becomes reactionary from sheer hatred of monotony. I suppose that's the sort of mood in which half the idiotic things in the world are done. Another cocktail?"

"Certainly not. I think if you are ready we will go home and change. Mr. Paul is always afraid if any of his friends come late that there will be no dinner left."

Frances rose to her feet.

"Then let's hurry," she proposed. "I'm hungry."

Paul came eagerly forward to meet them as soon as the two girls entered the restaurant. His first quick smile of gratitude was flashed towards Miss Brown, but it was Frances with whom he walked to a corner table.

"It is good of you to come here," he said. "I have been hoping so much to see you again. It is a small place and I fear that we have not much to offer. We shall serve you gladly, however."

"I am sure it will be very nice," Frances replied. "Edith loves coming here."

"Miss Brown has been very kind. It is always a pleasure to see her. I hope you will like what we have this evening," Paul went on, presenting the menu. "There is plenty of stewed chicken, but I am afraid the fish is nearly all finished. We have some excellent sardines and anchovies though."

"Give us just what you have, please," Miss Brown begged, "and half a bottle of the *vin rosé*."

Paul hurried away to arrange for their meal. Frances looked after him curiously.

"A most attractive young man," she declared, "if one can only get over the idea of his being a waiter."

"He is a gentleman playing the part of a waiter," Miss Brown corrected. "I admire him for it very much. He is trying to help his father and mother and sister."

Frances lighted a cigarette and looked around.

"It's rather a jolly little place," she observed. "I suppose that's Mama behind the desk?"

"That is the sister talking to her," Miss Brown pointed out. "I don't see the father to-night. He is generally at that top table quarrelling with an old friend about the conduct of the war."

"Interesting," Frances murmured. "And the young man? Does he flirt with you?"

"Mr. Paul is not that sort. Neither am I. I like him very much, as any one would who knew him however slightly. Besides, it is you whom he admires."

"Then he's stupider than he looks," Frances declared. "You're much nicer than I am, you know, really, Edith — sweet and soft and conscientious, — and a dainty little thing, although you do dress like a frump on the streets. If I were a man I should be crazy about you."

Paul's sister came a little languidly down the room and talked to them for a minute or two; Madame bowed graciously from behind her desk.

"I suppose these people are real," Frances remarked, as she flicked the ash from her cigarette. "Somehow or other they seem to me like ghosts — Madame there with her face like a sphinx, making out bills, and the girl, obviously so tired of life, yet saying just the right thing, moving about as though she were in a palace instead of in a dingy little restaurant run by her father and mother. And your 'Mr. Paul.' He is really like the pictures of the wonderful young soldiers you see in *Levée* uniform standing round the throne—and here he comes bringing the sardines!"

Paul lingered for a few minutes talking all the while to Frances. After each course he brought later he watched the two girls anxiously.

"It is good?" he asked, referring to the chicken. "You like it? Some more of the rice, perhaps?"

"Excellent," they both told him.

"If you knew what a treat it is to eat food like this," Frances said, "after the wretched little messes I get at home."

"It is simple," Paul replied, evidently gratified, "but we are very clean and careful in the kitchen. Now I prepare you special coffee."

Miss Brown glanced around the room.

"And please have yours with us," she begged. "There are so few people left."

He accepted her invitation with a grateful little bow and sat at the end of the table.

"Can you tell me, please," Miss Brown enquired, "whether you know anything about the Princess Strepaff and her husband?"

"One knows who they are, of course," the young man replied, after a moment's hesitation. "They are like the rest of us, only they are fortunate. The Princess saved her jewels and they both have gifts."

"They belong to your society?" Miss Brown ventured to ask.

Paul seemed for a moment embarrassed.

"As a matter of fact," he admitted, "they do not. Amongst some of us — my father for one — there has always existed a curious feeling of distrust of the Strepaffs. They are born, of course; their position is unassailable, but the Prince has sometimes expressed very curious views, and there exists, as one knows, between the Princess and Malakoff, the musician, a great friendship."

"And Malakoff?"

"He is one of the most advanced Communists in the world," Paul declared gravely. "He lives out of Russia, but he is none the less dangerous. There is a belief that it is he who has organised the International Communistic Association on the Continent, and that, as you may have heard, is a very dangerous movement. But I perhaps say too much. Of the Prince or the Princess I know very little. They have been generous in helping some of our poorer fellow countrypeople. They appear to lead harmless and pleasant lives. Would you please to tell me why you enquire?"

"The Princess has a place in the country near where I live," Frances explained, "and she has invited my friend

and me to come to a party at her house in Chelsea to-night."

Paul for a moment looked grave.

"You think that I had better not go?" Miss Brown asked. "I cannot see why I am invited. It is simply because the Princess knew that I shared a room with Frances."

"The Princess' parties down at Chelsea are quite famous in their way," Paul confided. "It was through your friend, Miss Brown, that your invitation came?"

"Entirely," she assured him.

"Then I would not deprive myself of the pleasure of going," he decided. "One knows of your discretion and of that it is not necessary to speak. I shall wish you both a very pleasant evening, and I hope that next time you honour me here you will tell me all about it. You will excuse me now if I leave?" he added, rising to his feet. "I am due at the Cosmopolitan in twenty minutes, and I must change my clothes. If you will give me the money for your bill I will save you the trouble of going to the desk."

Miss Brown hastily counted out the amount from her purse, and added a shilling.

"You will give this, please, to the people who work for you in the kitchen," she begged.

Paul accepted it gravely and without the slightest embarrassment.

"You are very thoughtful," he said. "I hope you will come again soon."

He took his leave after a final word or two with Frances, who had relapsed during the last few moments into a puzzled silence. As soon as he was gone, she leaned across the table.

"Edith," she declared, "I suspect you of leading a double life. What does it all mean?"

"What does what mean?"

"Why, your asking this young man about the Strepaffs, your consulting with him as to whether you shall go. You told him that you were asked because I was asked — as my companion. Now I come to think of it I don't believe that is the truth."

"Not the truth!"

"Why, the Princess asked no end of questions about you," Frances went on. "I met her quite casually. She came down to see if I could supply her with eggs, and she showed not the slightest interest in me until in the course of conversation I told her that I shared a bed-sitting-room in Shepherd's Market with a friend who was a typist. I can see her look at me now when I told her that, her eyebrows a little raised, a queer expression in her face, and then she asked me your name. What on earth did she want to know your name for? I told her, and she listened as though she scarcely heard. The next day they asked me to dinner, and the day afterwards this invitation for both of us! The last word I had with her was 'be sure to bring Miss Brown.' Edith, you're an uncommunicative little pig. I knew something had happened."

Miss Brown considered for several moments in perplexed silence. It was Frances, however, who relieved the situation. She crushed out the remains of her cigarette upon the plate and rose to her feet.

"Let's go," she suggested. "Thank heavens curiosity is the only woman's vice I don't possess."

CHAPTER X

The reception was in full swing when the two girls arrived. Miss Brown, who was inclined to be shy, saw with a sinking heart rows upon rows of coats and hats and cloaks in the hastily extemporised cloak room.

"What a crowd, Frances!" she murmured.

"All the better," was the consoling reminder. "No one will notice us."

There was a studio on the right from which issued the sound of a jazz band and the shuffling of feet. From the rooms on the left came the clamour of many voices.

"Her Highness receives this way," an overheated butler announced with a wave of the hand.

They followed him into a reception room packed with people who were making slow progress past their hostess. The butler announced them in a voice which utterly failed to compete with the buzz of conversation, and withdrew to seek out other late comers. Miss Brown, one of a little phalanx, with pleasant faces all around her, and cheerful, well-bred voices in her ears, smiled at herself for her fears, which suddenly seemed ridiculous. Inch by inch they made progress until at last they arrived before a tall, dark woman, who wore her hair, black as jet, in an old-fashioned manner, with a small coronet upon her forehead and a diamond necklace around her neck. She thrust out a long, nervous hand to Frances.

"My little friend from the chicken farm!" she exclaimed. "I am so glad you were able to come. And this is Miss Brown."

The Princess looked at Miss Brown, and Miss Brown looked with equal interest at the Princess. There was a

moment's perceptible pause. Then the latter turned smilingly away.

"I hope you two will amuse yourselves," she said. "There is some dancing in the studio and some music in the garden pavilion. You must come and talk to me later, both of you."

She turned away to welcome some incoming guests, and more than ever Miss Brown smiled at her own foolishness.

"I don't want any of that soul-stirring minor music," Frances whispered. "Let's go and see if some one will take pity on us and dance."

They made their way to the studio, crowded with people, mostly young, all gay. There were neither introductions, ceremony, nor standing about. From the moment of their entrance they found themselves dancing, changing partners, all the time breathless.

"We do this sort of thing here," one young man remarked, as he paused for a moment to mop his forehead. "The Princess likes it. 'Every one must dance and no girl must be left without a partner' are her orders. So every one does dance."

"I think it is a very hospitable notion," Miss Brown ventured.

"It's all right," her companion assented. "I'm all for it. I'm not like some of these fellows. When I come out to dance I like to keep going."

Away they went again. There was no pause. The band seemed untiring and fresh crowds were continually invading the floor.

"I say, what about a drop of something?" Miss Brown's partner suggested at their next pause.

Miss Brown's murmured assent was distinctly approving. Half way to an anteroom, however, where drinks were being dispensed, they came face to face with the Princess. Her fingers rested upon the arm of a tall, dis-

tinguished-looking man with a thin, pointed, grey beard, carefully trimmed eyebrows and waxen, wrinkled cheeks. The Princess welcomed them cordially.

"I am glad to see you are doing your duty, Guy," she said. "I wish to present you to a young lady, a wonderful dancer. Mr. Pennington, I shall ask you to look after Miss Brown for a minute or two. Mr. Pennington — Miss Brown."

"We were just going to have a drink," the young man, who had taken rather a fancy to his companion, remarked.

"You can have as many as you like presently," the Princess replied. "You can give me one now, if you will, and afterwards you must dance with my young friend."

"You won't desert me altogether, fair incognito?" he begged, looking back at Miss Brown.

"Never," she assured him fervently. "You dance too well."

"A remark," Mr. Pennington murmured, as they moved away together, "which leaves me somewhat at a disadvantage, because I do not dance at all. Nevertheless, you are committed to my charge. May I suggest a little refreshment?"

Miss Brown was thirsty and did not hesitate to say so. They found some excellent champagne cup, and afterwards she looked around rather wistfully for her partner. He seemed to have disappeared altogether however. The Princess had seen to that.

"I am afraid," Miss Brown's new companion said, "that I am going to be a great bore to you, young lady. I am going to ask you to give me not two minutes of your time, but a solid quarter of an hour. After all, you know, it is only half-past eleven, and this party will go on until six in the morning."

"I am very pleased to give you as much of my time as you choose," Miss Brown replied with her usual polite-

ness. "I know no one here. Only I'm a little sorry that you do not dance. You see, I read very few books, I see no pictures, I go to no parties. There is nothing for me to talk about."

"There might be a great deal," her companion declared earnestly. "We will take these two easy-chairs. Do you smoke?"

Miss Brown shook her head.

"I am a very dull person," she confessed.

"You object?"

"Not in the least," she assured him, settling herself comfortably in her chair. "Now please tell me how you intend to spend a quarter of an hour talking to such an ignorant person as I am."

"With pleasure. First of all, you know who I am, don't you?"

"Mr. Pennington, I thought the Princess said your name was. Ought I to know more than that?"

"Why should you?" he replied. "I am an M. P. but I am very little known as a politician."

"Pennington the Communist?" Miss Brown exclaimed, with sudden inspiration.

"I am he," was the smiling admission.

Miss Brown glanced at his perfectly fitting clothes, his neat jewellery, his air of almost elderly foppishness.

"One learns a great deal through coming into the world sometimes," she murmured. "I have read some of your speeches in the Sunday papers, and I pictured you always with a flannel shirt and a red tie, beating the air with an unclean fist."

"A great many people have the same idea," Mr. Pennington observed. "You see, the times are changing so rapidly now that it is hard to discard one's old ideas quickly enough. I was at Winchester and Oxford. Nevertheless I am a Communist by conviction, an insurgent So-

cialist, a future — believe me — a future Prime Minister of England."

"I hope not," Miss Brown murmured fervently.

"You hope not," he argued, "because as yet you do not understand. Don't be afraid. I am not going to try to convert you — not all at once, at any rate. Nevertheless, I should like to be honest. I came here to-night to meet you. I want to tell you some things which I feel sure you do not understand — you have had no opportunity of understanding. You have been dragged into an affair which does not concern you, and you have heard only one side of a question upon which the happiness of the world depends."

So after all, her first instincts had been right. Miss Brown forgot the music of the dance, all that joyous sense of being at a party with the full intention of having a good time. She was her very official self again — calm, inaccessible, uncommunicative.

"Mr. Pennington," she said, "I am afraid you are making a mistake. You think that I have been trusted by some one because of my convictions. That is not so. I have no convictions. I am a typist earning as a rule from four to five pounds a week, and doing my best to work faithfully for my employers. I have been entrusted with a commission, as you seem to know. It is not my business to enquire into the nature of that commission. I simply have my duty to do. Nobody, nothing, will prevent my doing it to the fullest extent of my power."

"Very reasonably spoken," Mr. Pennington admitted, "but, Miss Brown, listen. I can tell you a great deal you do not know. Wouldn't you like to understand more clearly what the whole business means? Aren't you a little at sea yourself sometimes?"

"It isn't necessary for me to understand," was the stubborn rejoinder. "I should do what I have pledged

my word to do to the best of my ability even if my brain should tell me it was wrong. I have accepted a trust and I shall carry it out."

"Still, let me try to make everything clearer to you," he pleaded. "You will forgive my saying so, but the average man or woman in the State is so deliberately, wickedly ignorant of modern social conditions. You look eastward, for instance. You recall to your memory all the horrible tales you have heard of the Russian revolution, of men shot without trial, of outrage and injustice of every sort, of those lazy, overfed aristocrats driven out of the country to work for their livings, and you think terrible things of an earnest people struggling — struggling desperately, believe me — towards the light."

"Are you a sympathiser with Bol ——"

"Don't mention the word, I beg of you," Mr. Pennington interrupted breathlessly. "It doesn't exist any more. Those ideas are dead. The people who held them have passed on their way. After centuries of evil government of every sort, who should dare expect that Russia would emerge a sane, well-governed country in a matter of twelve or fifteen years? It would have been a miracle, and it would have been a miracle which hasn't happened. Her warmest friends do not deny that she has wallowed in the mire since the days of the Revolution. But this, Miss Brown, is the truth — she is finding herself. Unless she is beaten down and bullied out of existence by the tyrannical West, she will emerge in your time, even in mine, the best governed, the freest country in the world."

"That is very interesting," Miss Brown admitted. "I suppose I ought to be more interested than I am. At present I do not like Russia."

Mr. Pennington reached out his hand and drank slowly from the glass by his side. He opened a case and selected a cigarette.

"You permit?" he begged. "I thank you. Let us then leave Russia alone for the moment. She is still drawing her first breaths and God knows she has been guilty of excesses enough. Now I am an Englishman; typical of my class, I believe; a philosopher, an historian, and a thinker. I am a Communist by conviction, Miss Brown. I see the days coming when the capitalist can exist no longer. In his present predominance he is a wrong and wicked feature of our civilization. He must go, as in time all abuses must fade away, but when I say I am a Communist I want you to understand me. Complete communism is an idealistic state, but it is not workable in this country. Do you understand me?"

"I think so."

"Therefore," Pennington went on, "the modern Communist is a reasonable person. We work not for finalities, not for any precise and definite goal, but we work towards that goal, and, believe me, the working is good. Capital, with various restrictions apportioning its share of profits, is welcome in Russia to-day. Those fantastic theories which were preached as the new gospel when Russia first felt her soul, have already been thrown into the waste paper basket of life. The modern Communist seeks the betterment of the world, the drawing together of classes, the disappearance of world inequalities. He recognises the folly of preaching the doctrine of equality for men of unequal gifts, but basically this is his pronouncement: that every man born into the world should have an equal chance. That is true communism, and it is an international doctrine, it does not belong to Russia alone."

"Are the people who are in power in Russia to-day," Miss Brown asked timidly, "as liberal in their ideas as you are?"

"They are becoming so," Mr. Pennington assured her, "but believe me, the world is prejudiced against Russia.

The world cannot forgive her not unnatural plunge into tyrannical politics. The French were more bloodthirsty in their revolution, but they were saner. Russia in time will pay her debts, in time those who are willing to return as serviceable citizens will be welcomed, but there is one thing and one thing only which might retard for years her reëstablishment amongst the nations of the world."

He paused with marked deliberation. Miss Brown remained sphinxlike. She asked no question. She waited without any sign of obvious interest.

"The greatest tragedy which could happen to the universe," Mr. Pennington pronounced, "would be the handing over to the present Home Office of the record of Dessiter's investigations as compiled by him up to the day of his death."

And still Miss Brown said nothing. She retained her position of listener. Occasionally her foot moved to the music.

"My dear young lady," Mr. Pennington continued, leaning sideways from his chair, "I want, if I can, to make you understand this: the Government of Russia is changing even as we sit here, but until the last few weeks or months it has been in the hands of the extremists. It was so when Dessiter started that series of unique secret service exploits right in her midst, from Petersburg to Moscow, from Warsaw to Bucharest, from Rome to Barcelona, all the time diabolically successful. He was right — according to his lights he was amazing. Now, see how frank I am going to be. There are men in Russia to-day who are planning a world-wide revolution and whose greatest desire is that it should start in England. Dessiter knew this when he entered the lists against them. He paid with his life but he came out a conqueror. He discovered facts enough to damn them in the eyes of the world, facts which would paralyse all their efforts towards this revolu-

tion it is true, but which would, alas, set Russia back in the minds of Europe and the world for generations. We who wish for the welfare of humanity, Miss Brown — in Russia especially — don't want those facts published. Now I should like to explain to you even more fully why."

Miss Brown's late partner looked tentatively into the room and her eyes flashed a message of appeal to him. He came hopefully forward, and Miss Brown rose to her feet.

"Mr. Pennington," she said, "I think it is wonderful of you that you should have taken so much time and trouble with, I am afraid, rather a stupid person. I have been very interested in all that you have said, but you see I am not a principal, I am just one of the links in the chain, and a link must never think for itself. What I have pledged my word to do I should do even against my will, even against my conviction. Every one else is so much cleverer than I am. They may be right or they may be wrong. The only thing that is easy is to keep one's word to the dead."

Her fingers were already upon the young man's arm. Her valedictory smile to the companion she was leaving was full of apology.

"You will forgive me if I dance for a little time, please," she begged. "I have so few opportunities. Once more, thank you so much for all you have told me."

Miss Brown, a small wisp of black, neat and shapely, but with none of the modern confections of *toilette*, with only those large blue eyes and the simple grace of her movements to draw men's gaze after her, clung confidingly to her partner as they neared the studio. Her late companion, who had apportioned to himself in some future government the functions of that minister whose chief qualification must be diplomacy, looked after her in baffled and angry silence.

CHAPTER XI

Mr. Pennington was a serious man of affairs, but he would not have been the brilliant politician he was if he had not been possessed of a sense of humour. The frown very soon disappeared from his forehead after the irritation of Miss Brown's departure. He beckoned to an attentive footman to refill his glass and, leaning back in his chair, laughed softly to himself. It was a laugh which began with a smile but which broadened until it seemed to lighten all his features, to bring a sparkle to his eyes. Presently he sat up, drank his champagne cup, and started off in search of his hostess.

"Successful I can see, my dear Charles," she murmured, as she greeted him. "What chance had a poor, simple little child like that against you?"

The corners of his lips twitched again.

"Successful, Princess?" he repeated. "On the contrary the most complete and utter failure of my life."

She led him to a corner and sat down by his side, fanning herself gently.

"Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. And upon my honour it wasn't my fault. I can assure you that I was never more convincing. I ignored all that I should have ignored. I preached the doctrine of moderation, I appealed to her vanity. I tried to make her understand that she was the Joan of Arc who might save the world. And, for all my eloquence, I might have been reading out of a history book to a backward child."

"You made no impression whatever?"

"Not the slightest. Her little platitudes were too in-

genuous for reality. She mocked herself with me. Nothing that I said stirred her for a moment. In the end a light shone out of those eyes of hers, up came a beaming young man, and away she went. She is dancing now to the strains of 'No, No, Nanette'."

"This is serious," the Princess ruminated.

"It is serious indeed," Pennington agreed. "Dessiter was a wizard. God knows what there was that he left undiscovered. Rome, Bucharest and Madrid are all uneasy. I hear to-day that Rome is thinking of shutting down."

"Incredible!"

"I don't agree. You must remember there is Mussolini. He doesn't have to wait for a government to tell him what he may do. If Dessiter's notes really contain the names of the Secret Six in the Plaza Gionni and their authenticated programme, he'd have them all shot on sight, every one of them — merciful end, too, compared to what would happen if the Fascists got hold of them."

"And that girl," the Princess murmured — "that little mouse of a creature with her quiet voice and timid manners and baby blue eyes — holds in the palm of her hand our cause — the world's cause!"

"Of course I didn't try bribery," Pennington reflected. "It wasn't my rôle. I talked to her as a great open-minded statesman speaking from the platform of philanthropy. I think I was right, too. She doesn't seem to me the sort of girl to be bought. A man — the right man — might be our only chance."

"Don't say our 'only' chance," the Princess protested. "Because you failed yourself I am not going to admit that she's unassailable."

"I have always looked upon human life as entirely sacred," Mr. Pennington observed, remembering his utterances during the war and his discreet absence from any possible scene of action. "All the same if the sacri-

fice of one life should be for the welfare of millions, to hesitate would be a purely foolish sentiment. We have our department, you know, for dealing with this sort of problem."

"We will leave that to the last resort," the Princess insisted. "I shall go now and make my own little effort. You are not leaving just yet?"

"Not without seeing something more of you, I hope." She smiled.

"Alex is a little difficult to-night," she confided, "but if people will go in reasonable time I think he will make for the Club. Take me as far as the studio. The people seem to be thinning out already."

"I fancy your Pole was a little too much for them in the music room," Pennington remarked, with a smile. "Anything quainter than the sounds he produced from that instrument of his I have never heard. 'The music of the dawn,' he called it. A painful birth!"

"You English are hopeless about music," the Princess rejoined indifferently. "There, I see the young woman. You go and make yourself agreeable to Alex."

Miss Brown and Frances had drifted momentarily together, and were discussing their departure. The Princess touched the former upon the shoulder with her fan.

"So Mr. Pennington had no luck with you, young lady," she observed.

"I enjoyed my conversation with him very much," was the discreet reply.

"So long as you weren't bored," the Princess murmured. "I hope you two girls aren't thinking of going?"

"I have work in the morning," Miss Brown regretted.

"And I have to find my way back to Meadowley some time," Frances sighed.

"One glass of my favourite cup just we three together," the Princess invited, leading the way. "We were talking

about Mr. Pennington — a brilliant man and I believe moderately honest — but politicians get on my nerves. They are always in earnest and they can never see any side of a question except their own. I am afraid I rather spoilt your evening, Miss Brown, by handing you over to him. Let me make amends for it. Come and have lunch with me to-morrow. I am expecting a very charming compatriot who speaks English perfectly — and who never talks politics."

"I am sorry, Princess," Miss Brown declined, "but I have work to do all day, and my lunch is a very trifling matter."

"Nonsense!" her hostess exclaimed. "I insist. And Miss Austin must come with you. If you can arrange that, I will take you back to Meadowley with me," she added, turning to Frances. "We are going down to-morrow to hunt on Friday."

"Delightful!" Frances murmured. "It's a hateful train journey. You'll come, won't you, Edith?"

"The Princess is very kind," Miss Brown acknowledged.

After that came the end of the party so far as the two girls were concerned. They travelled home in a taxi, and Frances was unusually silent.

"Any interesting partners?" Miss Brown enquired.

Frances roused herself.

"No, I hadn't your luck. I had two very callow youths and an elderly man who puffed all the time and said that my legs were too long. On the whole I should have preferred my vulgar Mr. Frankland notwithstanding his wife. What on earth was Mr. Pennington talking to you all that time about?"

"He was trying to explain a political matter to me."

"But why on earth should he?" Frances exclaimed. "My dear Edith, what does it all mean? I'm not a curious person, as I told you once before this evening, but why

have you so suddenly become an object of interest to so many people? The Princess would never have asked me there to-night but for you. Now we're going to lunch with her to-morrow. You spent at least half an hour with the one man whom all the woman were crazy to talk to. What new walk of life have you plunged into whilst I have been looking after my chickens?"

Miss Brown was not a demonstrative person, but she took her friend's arm and held it tightly.

"Frances dear," she said, "I wish I could tell you all about it, but I can't. In a week or two it will all be over. Then I promise that I will tell you everything. I just by chance walked into a great adventure. Very soon my part in it will be over. Then I promise that you shall know everything."

Frances lit a cigarette and put her feet up on the opposite seat.

"I am not going to be sulky," she declared. "If you don't feel you can tell me that's the end of it, but you'll admit it's a little mysterious."

"And I'm such a commonplace person," Miss Brown sighed.

There was a single letter waiting for Miss Brown when the two girls entered their room in Shepherd's Market, a letter with a typewritten address and with the name of the bank embossed on the flap of the envelope. Its contents were brief and unilluminating:

The Manager presents his compliments to Miss Brown, and would be obliged by an immediate call.

CHAPTER XII

Miss Brown presented herself in due course on the following morning at the offices of the Central Bank. She was ushered at once into the private room where the manager welcomed her with an air of some relief, took a paper from his desk and passed it across to her.

"Is that your signature, Miss Brown?" he asked.

She read the few lines written on a plain sheet of paper dated from Shepherd's Market:

Kindly hand bearer the packet deposited with you on November 11th.

Edith Brown.

She shook her head.

"A wonderful imitation," she admitted, "but I never wrote it. Don't tell me," she cried with sudden terror, "that you have parted with the packet."

The manager hastened to reassure her.

"We compared the signature with your own," he said, "and we failed to find the slightest divergence anywhere. Fortunately, however, from your point of view, your instructions were definite not to hand the packet over to any one, whether they presented an order or not. We kept the order and asked the bearer to call again in an hour. This was yesterday. Naturally he never returned."

Miss Brown drew a little sigh of relief.

"Thank God you didn't part with it!" she exclaimed.

The manager coughed.

"We always endeavour," he said, "to carry out our

clients' instructions to the letter. I asked you to call this morning, however, not only to mention this occurrence but to suggest to you that perhaps it would be as well for you to withdraw your packet and place it, say in the Chancery Lane Safe Deposit Vaults, or with a bank with vaults somewhere in the heart of the City."

"Don't you want to keep it any longer?" Miss Brown asked, a little fearfully.

The manager pressed the tips of his fingers together.

"The last thing in the world we desire," he assured his visitor, "is to seem disobliging. We welcome clients. We welcome business of every sort, and we are always ready to be of any assistance to our customers, but this packet of yours — you wouldn't care to treat me with confidence, I suppose, and tell me what it contains?"

"I am not in a position to do that."

"Just so. Well, as I was explaining, it seems to me, if you don't mind my saying so, rather a troublesome possession. Since we had it my attention has been called on a great many occasions to the number of suspicious looking people hanging about the place. Then we've had at least half a dozen self-declared civil engineers call on different pretexts, trying for permission to examine our vaults. One very nearly did succeed in getting downstairs in my absence. He presented a plan for an enlargement of the vaults, which we have been contemplating for some time, at such a ridiculously low price that my deputy here was on the point of allowing him to go down and take some measurements, when fortunately I returned. The care of your packet, if you will forgive my saying so, Miss Brown, is getting just a little on our nerves, and we would rather you removed it."

Miss Brown looked, as she felt, both perplexed and anxious.

"Don't you see," she pointed out, "that probably

that's exactly what these people have been after — to make you uneasy and to get you to ask me to remove the packet. I very nearly had it taken from me in Shepherd's Market when I brought it here, and I only just slipped by a man who chased me in a taxicab to the very door. Now I shall have to go through all that again."

"We will endeavour to spare you any anxiety of that sort," the manager promised. "Give me the slightest intimation even of the nature of the contents of your parcel, and we will arrange for an escort of police when you come to fetch it. That would do away with any shadow of risk."

Miss Brown reflected.

"Will you give me a few days, please, to think matters over?" she begged.

"Certainly," he acquiesced. "We'll let the matter stand over until, say next Thursday. I'm sorry to have seemed disobliging, especially to a client recommended by the late Colonel Dessiter, but I have the interests of the bank to consider."

Miss Brown took her leave a little depressed. For the first time it was necessary for her to make plans for herself, and the responsibility appalled her. She did not forget, however, to look around as usual and take note of any one who might be following her. There was one young man who seemed to be always at her elbow, and who somehow or other irritated her more than the others. She met his direct gaze as she hesitated upon the pavement, and in her somewhat disturbed state of mind she committed what was for her a foolish action. She walked straight up to him.

"Will you tell me, please," she demanded, "why you are continually following me about? Who employs you to do it? What do you want from me?"

The stranger raised his hat.

"My dear young lady," he protested, "I can assure you that you are mistaken."

"I am not mistaken, and you know that I am not," she replied angrily. "I get tired of it. It is so stupid. If you follow me any more I shall appeal to the police."

The man smiled. He was a stolid-looking person who might very well have been a member of the force himself in plain clothes. His voice, however, was a cultivated one and his manner, notwithstanding his slight note of mockery, civil.

"Madam," he warned her, "you will permit me to remind you that if there is any question of police in the matter, it is the young lady who addresses a man without an introduction who usually finds herself in trouble. I should be careful to take the initiative, and I may add that the magistrates are very severe on such cases."

Miss Brown turned away with flaming cheeks. She entered a taxi and drove back to Shepherd's Market for Frances. They took the taxi on to the Ritz and made their way down to Chelsea by omnibus. Soon they were driven inside by the rain and Miss Brown looked disconsolately out of the streaming windows.

"What a filthy morning!" she exclaimed with a little sigh.

Frances glanced at her friend curiously. It was not often that the latter betrayed her moods.

"Was your bank manager disagreeable?" she enquired.

"I don't suppose he meant to be. He was just stupid. Then another man annoyed me."

Frances nodded sympathetically.

"And you didn't want to come to this lunch, did you?"

"I wasn't very keen," was Miss Brown's candid admission. "Still, it seemed ungracious when the Princess was so kind, and your getting a lift down this afternoon made such a difference to you. I hope there won't be a crowd."

"Only one guest," Frances reminded her.

The Princess had been as good as her word. She welcomed them upon their arrival in a small, strange-looking room, whose hangings and walls were of black and white after the passing futurist style, the austerity of which, however, was toned down by the masses of flowers which seemed crowded into every corner. The remaining guest had already arrived, a thin-faced, nervous man, with a black beard, masses of black hair, and eager searching eyes. The Princess introduced him as Mr. Serge Malakoff.

"Mr. Malakoff, as I daresay you girls know, is living in the South of France," she observed. "He has come over to conduct his own opera at Covent Garden next week."

They both looked at him with interest. Neither of them, as a matter of fact, knew anything worth knowing about music, but the newspapers during the last few days had had much to say about the coming of the great composer. Mr. Malakoff spoke English rather slowly but in a pleasant voice and with great correctness.

"I had, too, another object in making my visit to England," he explained to Edith. "I was a great friend of a very distinguished Englishman, Colonel Dessiter. I arrived here, alas, only two days after his death."

"That was very sad," Miss Brown murmured, with a little sinking of the heart as she realised that once more she must be upon her guard.

"You mean that his death was sad," Malakoff continued. "It was worse than that — it was a tragedy. Dessiter was a great man — mistaken sometimes in his outlook as men of genius often are, but lion-hearted, a man of huge vision. I shall never cease to regret that I did not see him again alive — for many reasons."

Cocktails were brought in, and the subject, to Miss

Brown's relief, was temporarily dropped. They spoke of the party of the night before. Malakoff explained his absence by telling them that whilst in London he lived almost the life of a recluse, except for a little occasional intercourse with one or two English musicians.

"Before the production of a new work," he confided, as they made their way to the dining-room, "I, as a rule, shut myself up for a fortnight. I am afraid of losing the inner sense of what I must help my musicians to interpret. It is extraordinary how many difficulties a work of one's own composition presents if suddenly confronted with it when one's mind has been travelling in other directions."

"I know a modest authoress," the Princess remarked, as she waved them to their places at the table, "who often forgets her own plots."

"Your art, dear Princess," Malakoff observed, "nevertheless lives nearer to you than mine. I mean that you can send your mind more easily into the places where your ideas are born. Sometimes my music escapes me, and I think that it must travel into infinity, for there are phrases which have come to me sometimes in the night, have vanished with the dawn and never reappeared. You are interested in music, Miss Brown?"

"I am ashamed to say," Miss Brown confessed, "that I am utterly and entirely ignorant of it."

"It is a state which has its advantages," he declared, talking all the time but making also astonishing inroads upon the first course of his luncheon. "The bane of the musical world is the person with technical knowledge and no appreciation — none of the finer sense of appreciation, I mean. It is torture to talk with such a person. They speak with the words of understanding, and with a closed soul. My dear Princess, what caviare!"

The Princess made a sign and his plate was refilled.

"In the regrettable absence of vodka," he said, with a reproachful glance at his hostess, "I clamour for a glass of *Kümmel*."

The liqueur was duly presented and he drained the contents of a large glass. From then onwards the chief interest which Miss Brown had in the luncheon was in watching her neighbour's gastronomic exploits. He was frankly, almost childishly, aware of them.

"No one in the world," he boasted, "can eat as much as we Russians — and drink," he added meditatively. "Not only the ordinary people, but the artists — the great artists such as myself. Genius in Russia thrives upon physical support. The bloodless, ill-fed man there is a hopeless kind of creature. In the days when we had a church, when we had great preachers, the man whose life was the most spiritual probably ate and drank more than even the average."

"And yet," Miss Brown ventured, "you keep so thin."

"Eating and drinking has nothing to do with one's figure," he pronounced heretically. "One is thin or fat according to one's nervous organism and the demands made upon it. Twelve hours a day I think and dream music until I am exhausted, until I tremble all over sometimes with the ecstasy of some new phrase, sometimes with passion that what I seek eludes me. My spirit tears my body to pieces. I shall eat and drink all my days as I am doing now, and I shall remain as I am."

Malakoff's luncheon would have been a wonderful performance for a prize fighter, yet he ate and drank with a certain deliberation and with all the niceties of a cultured person. Occasionally he smoked a cigarette and most of the time he talked. About Russia he was silent, but he had a great deal to say about life in the South of France, the joy of continuous warmth in the summer months, the unexpected days of sunshine in winter.

"And now," he announced, turning to Miss Brown abruptly when the coffee had been served and the servants had left the room, "I will come to the object of this little meeting. I do not accept invitations to lunch as the Princess knows very well. I came here to meet you."

"Me?" Miss Brown repeated faintly, with a sinking heart.

"Entirely. I am a man who likes to disclose himself. If I had reached here before the death of my friend Dessiter, he would, I know, have made me his literary executor. We had the same tastes; we detested the same institutions. He had confidence in my judgment. He realised that sometimes he was too impetuous, that he would put things down on paper which must never find their way into print. People sometimes doubted his facts because of his adjectives."

"A very good line," the Princess murmured. "May I use it?"

Malakoff ignored her. He was engrossed in what he was saying. His eyes were fixed upon Miss Brown; the little wrinkles in his face seemed to have become deeper. He was nervously clasping and unclasping his wonderful white hands with their long, bony fingers.

"Young lady," he said, "I gather that my friend Dessiter died so unexpectedly that he had no time to send for me or any of his friends. You yourself know how suddenly things were over."

His eyes seemed to be boring their way into the back of Miss Brown's head. Miss Brown was listening attentively with a puzzled frown upon her forehead.

"Well," he concluded, "this is what I wish to ask you. You have by chance in your possession Dessiter's last messages to the world, the result of his last exploit and explorations. What are your instructions from him? What are you to do with them?"

"May I, before I answer, ask you something?" Miss Brown begged.

He waved his hand in assent, and she continued.

"How did you know that I had these notes in my possession?"

"From Dessiter's servant, Mergen," was the prompt reply. "Mergen is of no consequence. Already I believe he has taken another position. What I am suggesting to you, Miss Brown, is that you tell me what instructions you have with regard to your notes."

"I am sorry," Miss Brown replied, in a tone as colourless as her personality, when she wished it to seem so, "but I cannot answer your question. As a matter of fact, I have not yet received my final instructions."

"Not tell me?" Malakoff exclaimed, with a flash of the eyes. "But it is absurd! I was Dessiter's friend and confidant. Now listen. This I demand of you. Before you part with those notes you and I must go through them together, and the sooner the better. I will point out what it is wise to delete. That would have been my office if Dessiter had been alive."

Miss Brown had never looked so gentle, so almost insignificant except for her blue eyes. Nevertheless, there was something curiously definite about the shake of her head.

"What a pity that you arrived in England too late to see Colonel Dessiter, Mr. Malakoff," she said. "Now of course what you ask is impossible. I am only a servant in this matter. I have no latitude. I cannot depart from my instructions. Just as they were given to me I must fulfil them."

Malakoff leaned across the table. There was fury in his face. Suddenly he tore from the third finger of his left hand the one marvellous ring he was wearing — a ring containing a huge and amazing emerald. He threw it across the table.

"An empress gave me that," he cried. "A Rothschild could not buy it from me. There was nothing so wonderful in Russia at a time when Petersburg was a storehouse for the jewels of the world. There is nothing to-day so wonderful under the skies. Women have begged me for it by the hundreds. It is yours. You shall do what I ask, and it is yours. Pick it up. Look at it."

Miss Brown pushed it back without a word. She did not even trouble to speak; her little gesture expressed only contempt.

"Do I understand that you refuse my request — you know who I am and yet you refuse?" he demanded, striking the table with his fist so that the beautiful glasses rattled and shook, and some of the coffee from his cup was spilt upon the exquisite Florentine tablecloth with its inset lace.

"Of course I refuse, if you must put it like that," Miss Brown replied. "There isn't anything else for me to do."

Malakoff's face was livid. The man was beside himself with passion. Even the Princess was alarmed.

"Serge!" she exclaimed. "Serge, be careful! You must not excite yourself like this."

"But it is incredible!" he cried. "This young woman's obstinacy will do incalculable harm. She will bring trouble upon the whole world if Dessiter's last few months were spent as I have reason to believe that they were. Is it to be borne with, Princess, that I — Serge Malakoff — should ask for the confidence of this — this young lady typist," he spluttered out, swallowing back some other word — "and should be denied by her! I am to sit still like the others and see the work of years destroyed, see the wise schemes of the world's greatest brains rendered null and void, see all Europe set in ferment because of this young person's obstinacy!"

"Serge, you are forgetting yourself, besides which you

are exaggerating," the Princess reproved him. "Miss Brown is my guest here and you must not be rude to her. I may regret as much as you do that you cannot convince her. If you cannot, why, that must be the end of it."

"End of it!" Malakoff repeated, rising to his feet, his features twitching still with passion. "God, if she were a man I'd strangle her. I would be one of history's heroes when they realised what I had done. As it is ——"

He glared at her, and Miss Brown was for a moment afraid. Then he turned away and marched towards the door.

"I cannot stay here, Princess," he announced. "I cannot remain in the neighbourhood of stupidity so incredible. I am going to lock myself up. Ring, if you please, for my car."

The Princess rang the bell. Malakoff slammed the door behind him. Suddenly Frances began to laugh. The Princess followed suit. Miss Brown alone sat dumb and motionless.

"You mustn't be frightened, child," her hostess enjoined consolingly. "Serge is of course half mad. All these great geniuses are."

"Is it true that he was an intimate friend of Colonel Dessiter's?" Miss Brown asked.

"He says so," the Princess replied. "As a matter of fact, I believe he was. Both were men of strange habits. Come, we will go into my room and I will show you some Russian paintings."

The Princess became once more the charming and conversational hostess and presently they took their leave, after she had made an appointment to pick Frances up at the Ritz later in the afternoon. On their way back to Mayfair, the two girls spoke occasionally of Serge Malakoff, but otherwise remained more silent than usual. It was only when Frances had packed her bag and was pre-

paring to depart, that she alluded even indirectly to the adventure in which her friend had become involved.

"So, my little mouse, you've wandered off into a world where you can afford to refuse rings worth a fortune, and flout the greatest musician in the world."

Miss Brown made no reply. She was quite incapable just then of speech. She had picked up the *Times*, which had arrived during her absence, and her eyes were riveted upon the first paragraph in the personal column:

If Edith is really in earnest and the coast is clear will she meet Algernon at the nearest tube station to where they said farewell at six o'clock on Thursday evening?

CHAPTER XIII

Miss Edith Brown, quietly dressed almost to dowdiness, unassuming, unnoticed, at any rate by the general public — she kept her eyes downcast — stepped from a 'bus in front of the Gloucester Road Tube Station, and paused for a moment before making further progress. What happened during the next thirty seconds was almost breathless. The same voice that had spoken anxiously to her through the fog on the doorstep of the house in Lombertson Square, whispered in her ear.

"Algernon is here, madam," he said. "I trust that you have not forgotten me. Please step into that car as quickly as you can."

She stepped into the limousine he pointed out and he followed her quickly, slamming the door. They drove away and her companion pulled up both windows.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked him.

He hesitated.

"To an apartment in Whitehall," he confided. "It is over some public offices. There I am to hand you over to a relative, the executor, of the late Colonel Dessiter."

Miss Brown asked no more questions and they made their way swiftly through the traffic. Very soon they reached their destination and pulled up in front of a large block of buildings which Miss Brown had always understood to be Government Offices. There were two policemen standing on each side of the doorway, two more upon the pavement, and one or two plain clothes men sauntering about as though by accident.

"This way, madam, if you please," Miss Brown's escort begged. "It would be advisable to hurry."

They stepped quickly across the pavement and entered the building. There was no salute from the policemen, no greeting from those other official-looking loiterers who were scrutinising closely the faces of the passers-by. As soon as they were inside the portals of the building Miss Brown's companion led the way to the lift.

"Be prepared for a long ride," he warned her. "We are going up to what is practically the attic."

They passed corridor after corridor, most of them crowded with men of different ages carrying bundles of papers and the familiar brown cardboard folders. Arrived at the top, they mounted on foot still another flight of stairs, emerging on to a bare stone corridor which was apparently being patrolled by two be-medalled *commissionaires*. They nodded to Mergen, who opened a heavy oak door with a latchkey, and standing on one side, motioned his companion to precede him. Miss Brown found herself in a spacious apartment, somewhat scantily furnished, half as a sitting room, half as an office, with a fine Georgian writing desk in the middle of the room. The carpet, evidently new, was soft and luxurious. There were two comfortable easy-chairs and a huge sofa bedstead. Mergen indicated a chair.

"I will let Mr. Glyde know that you are here, madam," he said.

He disappeared through a door at the further end of the room and almost immediately a tall, thin man made his appearance. Miss Brown rose to her feet expectantly. The newcomer was clean-shaven, sallow, and his hair was almost completely white. His mouth, however, had very familiar characteristics. He walked with a slight limp, and carried a rubber-shod stick. His tone, abrupt though it was and full of vigour, reminded her of that voice which had first lifted her feet from the ground and trans-

ported her to the world of romance and tragedy and wonder.

"I am Miss Brown," she announced a little diffidently.

"And I am very glad to see you here," was the prompt and courteous reply.

"Mergen tells me," she continued, "that you are Colonel Dessiter's executor."

"I am his cousin. Glyde is my name — John Glyde. Mergen has told me the whole story of your visit to Lombertson Square. I am sorry to have had to leave you alone so long. Have you any news?"

"Any news?" Miss Brown reflected. "I am followed all the time wherever I go."

"Naturally."

"Some men tried to snatch my satchel away the morning I took the notebook to the bank."

"I heard of that. And since then?"

"A man called to interview me — said he heard that I was with Colonel Dessiter just before he died. I found out that he was an imposter. He then offered me money for Colonel Dessiter's last words."

"Enterprising! And since then?"

"Some one forged my name to an order and tried to get my notebook from the bank."

"They didn't succeed though!"

Miss Brown shook her head.

"I had warned the manager," she said, "that he was only to give the book into my own hands. There have been people there trying to get hold of it in all manner of ways. They have asked me to take it away before Thursday. Pennington, the Member of Parliament, did his best to persuade me that I could save the country from a terrible calamity if I gave him your cousin's notes."

"A smooth-tongued rascal!" John Glyde muttered.

"Then to-day at luncheon," Miss Brown went on, "there was Malakoff, the musician."

"Scoundrel! What about him?"

"He assured me that if he had reached England in time he would have been your cousin's literary executor. He wanted me to read through my notebook with him and allow him to edit it. He offered me his emerald ring if I would consent."

"Marvellous!" John Glyde murmured. "Do you know how much that ring was worth, young lady?"

She shook her head.

"A great deal of money from what he said," she remarked indifferently.

"A hundred thousand pounds at least," John Glyde assured her. "Do you realise that you have refused a hundred thousand pounds?"

Miss Brown smiled. There were times — the little wrinkles about the eyes — when John Glyde was very much like his cousin.

"If it had been a million," she said, "it would have been just the same. Please tell me, Mr. Glyde, was he speaking the truth when he said that he had been such a great friend of your cousin?"

"His breed can never tell the truth," was the scornful reply. "He is one of the most dangerous men on the other side. We have his name on the black list with a scarlet cross against it. He knows that well enough. He is one of the underground devils — the most dangerous of the lot. Seldom makes a speech, seldom appears on a platform, goes everywhere because of his accursed music, and collects more information than all the rest of his Secret Service together. If I have my way he'll be in the dock before his opera's produced. How did he approach you?"

"I met them both, Mr. Pennington and him," Miss

Brown explained, "through the Princess Strepaff. She has a house in the country in the same village as a friend of mine."

"Vadia Strepaff!" John Glyde sighed. "She was a decent woman once — always, in fact, until Malakoff became her lover. Steer clear of the whole gang in future, Miss Brown. You have done magnificently. Look me in the face though for one moment. Swear that no single word or line of what my cousin dictated to you has passed your lips."

She met his eyes unflinchingly. There was not the slightest doubt about his relationship to Dessiter. There was the same straight vision, the same compelling gaze.

"I have not even spoken of my adventure," she said, "to one single person."

"Good!" he exclaimed.

"On the other hand there is some one else whom I have met who seems to know a great deal about it," she went on. "I wanted to ask you about him."

"Some one else been trying to get at you, eh?"

"I don't think so," she replied doubtfully. "He helped me on one occasion and if it had been necessary for me to have trusted any one, I should have trusted him. His name is Mr. Paul, and he is a Russian. He dances at the Cosmopolitan and helps his father and mother with a restaurant."

This time there was neither anger nor suspicion in John Glyde's face. It softened perceptibly.

"A dear fellow!" he exclaimed. "And as brave as they make 'em. If there were many more as plucky as he there might still be some chance for Russia. They are beginning to realise that, the scoundrels. They'll get him before they're through."

"Who will and why?" Miss Brown asked anxiously. "I like Mr. Paul."

"The people with whom my cousin was at war," John Glyde answered — "the beasts who govern Russia to-day — filthy swine! London reeks with their spies. They know all about Mr. Paul. If we don't get at them first they'll have him and us."

"But surely the police," Miss Brown began timidly ——

"The police are well enough," John Glyde interrupted. "It's our politicians who are to blame for what has grown up in our midst. However, we've got a chance. We've got the initiative at any rate. We shall be launching the first thunderbolt before long."

He made his way to a safe built into the wall, busied himself with the lock for several moments, thrust in his hand and brought it out again holding an ordinary shorthand notebook with black shiny covers held together with a rubber band. He laid it down in front of Miss Brown.

"My book!" she gasped. "How on earth did you get that?"

He smiled.

"There are some matters," he said, "concerning which you had better not be too inquisitive at present."

"But it was left in the bank in my name," she cried, "and it was not to be given up to any one except to me personally."

"Even banks are human," was the dry response. "Anyhow there is your book, and on the table is your choice of two typewriters and an unlimited supply of paper and carbons. The sooner you complete your task the better — the better for you, the better for me and the better for the world."

Miss Brown took off her coat and her gloves and laid them tidily upon a chair. Then she also took off her hat and smoothed her hair. Her fingers were trembling a little and her heart pounding.

"I am quite ready," she announced, with her hand upon the book.

"I will be writing a letter or two at the other end of the room," John Glyde told her. "Call me if you want me."

Miss Brown's fingers wandered across the keys of the typewriter which she had selected. With her left hand she opened the book, although without its help she remembered that first sentence so well. Her fingers, however, remained in the air. The pounding at her heart seemed suddenly to cease. She turned over a couple of pages of the book quickly — turned it upside down and looked at the other end. Then a cry broke from her lips. John Glyde on his way to his desk turned quickly around.

"What's the matter?"

She pointed to the book with a trembling finger.

"It is the same make — I could have sworn to my rubber band — but it isn't my book. It is empty."

He was across the room in a couple of strides. His lameness seemed to have been forgotten, his expression was terrible.

"What do you mean?" he demanded fiercely.

She rose to her feet, still pointing to the book, and faced him. The fury of his tone had done nothing to cow her. There was a strange light flashing in her own eyes, a note of passion in her angry cry.

"I say that it is not my book," she exclaimed. "It is no more my book than you are John Glyde!"

CHAPTER XIV

The ensuing brief space of time was charged with incalculable tension. In the green shaded light from the lamp which Miss Brown had drawn close to the typewriter, her companion's face seemed for a moment ghastly. There was something menacing about the sudden deepening of those lines, the smouldering light of fury in his eyes. Miss Brown remained standing. At the first shock of discovery she had found herself trembling in every limb. The emotion had passed. She became the cooler of the two.

"I am only telling you what you can see for yourself," she said, pointing downward. "That is an exact replica of my book but there is not a word of writing in it, nor has there ever been."

"Are there any pages torn out?" he asked harshly, grasping the book in his hand.

"Not one. It is perfectly new and has never been used."

He threw it down. For a moment they looked at one another in a silence, ferocious, almost terrible. Miss Brown felt no single impulse of fear. According to her capacity she was angrier than she had ever been in her life.

"Have you any explanation to suggest?" he demanded.

"It is not for me to suggest explanations," was her prompt rejoinder. "From the moment when I left your house in Lombertson Square until the time when I entered the bank the next morning, the book was never out of my sight. I deposited it there with instructions that it was to be given to no one except to me personally. You bring me here. You produce what you say is my notebook, and

I find that it is not. Now I come to think of it I am not so much surprised. The book was deposited in the bank in my name and with the distinct understanding that it was to be handed over to no one else except me even though a written order should be produced. If this had really been my notebook the bank would have broken their trust with me."

"That is a trifle," he declared. "There are times when banks have to do as they are told. That is the notebook handed over by the manager of the bank this afternoon to the Chief Commissioner of Police and a representative of the Home Office. They had the manager's word for it that it was the book deposited by you."

"Then the manager lied," Miss Brown declared stubbornly. "The book which I deposited contained my shorthand notes taken down at your dictation. This one has never contained any writing of any sort whatever. It is not the same book."

"And where is yours?"

"How should I know?" she asked coldly. "I have not the Chief Commissioner of Police or the Home Office to call upon for aid. I have been simply a machine of which you have made use. I have carried out your instructions literally. If anything has gone wrong it is through some fault of your own, or because your enemies are cleverer than you are."

He caught at her wrist. Her eyes flashed, but she made no movement.

"Do you swear," he demanded harshly, "that you know nothing more than you say, that you haven't withdrawn the other book and sold it? They'd have given you half a million for it, I've no doubt."

She wrenched her wrist free, and began to put on her mackintosh. Her voice was unsteady now with smothered sobs.

"I am very sorry indeed," she declared, "that I ever found my way to Lombertson Square. Let me go, please. I shall not answer your question. I should like to go away at once."

He stood for several moments apparently fighting a battle with himself. Then he caught her arm just as she had turned towards the door. The fierce rigidity had passed from his features, the flame from his eyes. He seemed suddenly older.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Brown," he said. "It has happened to me only once before in my life to be carried away like this. I offer you my humble apologies."

The new Miss Brown disappeared. She ceased to button her mackintosh and sank back into her chair a little helplessly. Her eyes were full of forgiveness.

"I am so very sorry," she faltered. "Don't let us waste any more time. Let us think out just what may have happened."

He, too, sank into a chair. For a few moments he said nothing. He was like a man from whose living body the spirit had been expelled. He had that shattered look of impotence which is the most perfect negative expression of despair. Often afterwards he remembered that in this crisis — and he had lived through many — it was Miss Brown who took command of the situation.

"You say that the Chief Commissioner and some one from the Home Office went to the bank," she reflected. "The bank manager would not dare to refuse them what they asked, nor would he dare to attempt to deceive them. Therefore he handed over what he thought was the right packet. I suppose it couldn't have been changed on its way here?"

"The Chief Commissioner of Police brought it straight through to this room," he answered.

"Very well then," she went on, "we will rule that out

of the question. This book — a bogus book — came from the bank, and the manager may have really believed — he probably did — that this was the original one I left when he handed it over to the Chief Commissioner. There must be a clerk or some one there, though, in league with your enemies who knows that there were two similar packets. But Colonel Dessiter, what about the genuine packet? It took the Chief Commissioner of Police and a representative of the Home Office to obtain the bogus one. Why shouldn't the real one be still there? "

Dessiter was beginning to think again. For once in his life he was following a lead.

" It would scarcely have been worth their while to have planned all this," he reflected, " unless they had evolved some scheme for obtaining possession of the genuine one."

" It isn't a certainty that the scheme has succeeded though," she argued hopefully. " There is a distinct chance that the real packet — the one with my book and the letters — is still in the vaults of the bank."

" There is certainly a chance," Dessiter admitted. " This one was only fetched away just before closing time this afternoon. I wish to God I'd searched for the letters before. We could have had some one back at the bank in a quarter of an hour."

"At ten o'clock to-morrow morning I shall present myself there and demand my packet," she announced. " I shall leave it to you to see that I am not molested if by any chance I get it."

" I will arrange that," he promised. " We have a regular department here now, and a very good service. I'll have you fully protected. They haven't had much opportunity yet to get away with the real packet. The more I think of it, the more I believe there's a good chance that it's still there," he added hopefully. " The manager told the Chief Commissioner that no single clerk was allowed down

in the vaults alone. This fellow they've got hold of, whoever he may be, will have to wait for his opportunity."

He paused in his restless pacing of the room, went to a cupboard, brought out whisky and soda and helped himself.

"Some wine, Miss Brown?" he invited.

She shook her head.

"Nothing, thanks," she replied. "Then there's something else, Colonel Dessiter. You can't have forgotten what you dictated to me. Why not start it all over again this moment? Why not even hand in your information direct?"

He drank steadily half a tumblerful of whisky and soda, and lit a cigarette.

"I've done a little in that way already, Miss Brown," he admitted. "And if the worst comes to the worst of course I can re-dictate, but there are the addresses and those letters I want particularily — especially one of the letters. And then you see," he went on, "for the successful carrying out of our plans it was most important that they shouldn't know exactly how much we've discovered. Tell me," he asked abruptly, "when did you recognise me?"

"Only when you lost your temper," she assured him. "Up till then I was quite content to believe that the things in you which reminded me of Colonel Dessiter were just family traits. When afterwards you looked at me," she went on coolly, "as though you were going to take me by the throat and crush the life out of me, I suddenly realised who you were."

He nodded.

"I'm glad I didn't give myself away altogether," he said. "I have kept in the background all my recent life to such an extent that few people know me even by sight."

"Would it be indiscreet," Miss Brown enquired, "to

ask why your death was announced and why you seem to be in hiding? "

"Under the circumstances, nothing that you could ask me would be indiscreet," he told her. "It was Hartwell's suggestion — Hartwell is the Chief of our Home Secret Service. It's better for many reasons that the people whom we're up against just now should believe me out of the way. I haven't quite finished my job yet, and there are fifty of them in London at the present moment who, if they thought I was still alive, would manage to get at me somehow, even if they hadn't a ghost of a chance of getting away with it. I will say this for these anarchist blackguards," he went on thoughtfully, "that they think no more of their own lives than they do of the person's they set out to kill."

"They really do believe then that you are dead? " she asked.

"I'm pretty well sure of it," he answered. "They're showing signs everywhere of coming out more into the open. If they are once convinced that they've got hold of what they look upon as my deathbed revelations, and those letters, they'll be giving themselves away all the time."

"It all seems very difficult," Miss Brown mused, "to a practical person like myself. For instance, how did you manage about death certificates and that sort of thing, and how did you contrive to escape any enquiry about the man you killed that night? "

"We had to have a little help from the authorities naturally," Dessiter replied, with a grim smile. "They're not so altogether bound up in red tape as they used to be. If things turn out as I hope I'll piece the whole story together for you one day."

He walked to the window and, throwing it open for a moment, stood there listening. The roar of the traffic

from across the Bridge had changed to Piccadilly and Westward.

"Feel the draught?" he asked.

"Not at all."

"I like to hear that," he went on. "Sometimes when one's a little depressed, it's inspiring. One isn't working for nothing. One's working for them — the millions."

There was a knock at the door. Mergen entered with a tray. Miss Brown stood up and reached out for her hat.

"No you don't," Dessiter exclaimed hastily. "Stay and share my meal, Miss Brown. We haven't finished our conversation yet. I'll have you sent home later. What is there, Mergen?"

"A whole chicken for one thing, sir," the man replied — "plenty for two. A bottle of white wine, and red."

"Some more plates and things," Dessiter ordered.

They drew a table over to the fire. Mergen arranged the chairs and Dessiter carved the chicken.

"Well," the latter remarked as they began their meal, "the wheel of life moves strangely for us. A fortress in Whitehall with an officially dead man. Queer company for you, Miss Brown. I wonder what made you wander into Lombertson Square that foggy night."

"I was a little frightened," she confided. "I was trying to get away from the main streets and find a tube."

"You aren't easily frightened either."

"I should have been terrified of you half an hour ago, if I hadn't been so angry."

"I was a brute," he admitted. "I don't often lose my self-control though. I'm ashamed to have done it before you. I was at a disadvantage, remember. The only women I see anything of nowadays are the women I make use of abroad and one or two in England of the same class. I suppose that prejudices me against the sex. I hate

spies although I am a spy myself. Some of these women, especially those I make use of in England — I have a list of them somewhere — will sell their husbands, their best friends, even their lovers, for a pearl necklace."

"There are plenty of men with the same lack of principle," Miss Brown observed, "just as there are plenty of women who would refuse to have anything to do with your bribes. Have you never been married?"

"I? Married?" he scoffed. "Not likely! You can't disappear from a wife like you can from your friends, and sometimes I've had to lie doggo for a year at a time."

"It is very strange," she reflected, "that it should have been I whom fate chose to take down your reminiscences. Mine has been the most uneventful life you could possibly imagine. There has been no single incident in it, no romance, nothing but plain everyday existence, and yours — how amazing! I have never been so carried out of myself as when I sat opposite to you with my pen in my hand and you began to weave that amazing story. There was drama in the very setting — your wound, the dead man behind the screen, and then the wonder of the things you spoke about. I felt one moment as though I were in a palace and the next in a dirty café in some city whose name even I had never heard of before, and again watching you fighting for your life, all turmoil and colour and bustle and danger, beautiful things, and terrible things. Oh," she cried, "I have been aching so to set it all down on paper, to see the whole story grow beneath my fingers!"

"There's a great deal," he mused, "which will only be academically useful now. My Egyptian mission, for instance. Things have simmered down there. Those other troubles," he went on, leaning over towards the box of cigarettes, and helping himself, "Syria, Mesopotamia, Shanghai, seem only local when one has peered for a

moment into the abyss and realised the great cataclysm which might come. I have told them at the Foreign Office," he went on, speaking almost as much to himself as to her, " to count on me no more in the Orient. I took up this other job twelve months ago a little sceptically. It didn't really interest me. Now I know it's tremendous. I was like all the other people before. I didn't believe in the seriousness of the movement. If I saw the word ' Bolshevist ' in a newspaper or an article, I'd finished — no interest in it, no belief in the phrase. In a sense one was right. They don't really count any longer. They were the heralds of the real storm."

They had finished their dinner. He made coffee in a little pot and poured it out. Then he rang the bell.

"A car for Miss Brown in ten minutes," he directed — " protected. You understand. You will have to ring up X. Y. O. through our own exchange."

She laughed as the door closed.

" Forgive me," she begged, " but I have been such a simple person all my life — a lawyer's daughter in a quiet village, a nursery governess, a typist, without a spice of romance or adventure in her life. And now — ' a car for Miss Brown — protected ! ' "

He smiled thoughtfully.

" You may find," he warned her, " that you will never be able altogether to step back into that simple life. To-morrow, when we know just how we stand, we must talk seriously. To-night, now, in fact, I want you to go away. Some one is coming to see me whom you might probably recognise, and who would prefer not to be seen here."

She rose to her feet. He helped her on with her mackintosh a little awkwardly, and after looking around the room in vain for a mirror she put on her hat as well as she could under the circumstances. He handed her over to Mergen.

"You will be safely escorted home," he said. "To-morrow morning all that you have to do is to be at the bank the moment the clock has struck ten. The car to take you there will be outside your room at ten minutes to the hour. The remainder of the responsibility will be mine."

He held out his hand, and Miss Brown placed hers in it timidly.

"We part friends?" he asked, with a sudden, transforming smile.

"I hope so," she answered fervently. "I am very proud to think so."

Suddenly, to her immense surprise, he raised her fingers to his lips. Miss Brown hurried out to the lift with flushed cheeks.

CHAPTER XV

At precisely the hour when Miss Brown descended from the upper flights of the great building in Whitehall and entered the automobile which was to convey her safely to Shepherd's Market, Malakoff for the second time in the day gazed upon caviare. He was one of six men dining together in a private room above a café in Shaftesbury Avenue — six men who together comprised what was known as the Action Committee of the Advanced Communist Party, *Revolutionaires* all of them, in control of almost unlimited funds, and with an agenda which was never put on to paper. They were all men with a secret ambition to become Robespierres of the revolution to which they were pledged, sworn enemies of all manner of compromise, out to ravage the world with brimstone and fire if necessary, so long as they could plant the Red Flag upon its smouldering remains. One was Malakoff himself, the Continental agent of the Soviet, next to Lenin the most detested man in Russia; another was Bretskopf, the firebrand of Barcelona, a frankly declared anarchist, a man crazy with the lust for destruction, whose brain was always in a state of fury, to whom logic and common sense were pap for the babes, whose speech making had become in these days nothing but tirades of bloodshed; then there was Pennington, for all his suave manners many times more dangerous, a Communist by conviction, eloquent, a link between his party and the Socialists; Noel Frankland, leader of the Communists, an ex-officio member of this committee, whose very existence he would often deny in the House of Commons; Thornton, an ex-soldier who had fought valiantly in the war, come out of it with a griev-

ance, and who was now the pioneer of treason in the same ranks where he had once been a hero; and Pritchard, secretary of the Seamen's Union, a thin, cadaverous-looking man, with a mass of fair hair and an inexhaustible gift of words.

Malakoff attacked his caviare with appetite.

"Twice in one day!" he murmured. "We live — indeed we live! I lunched with the lady who deigns to bestow upon me just now a passing preference, and for England her food was wonderful."

"Why the devil don't you say your 'mistress' and have done with it?" Bretskopf demanded gruffly.

Malakoff cast a covert glance of dislike at the speaker.

"You are too coarse for any country but our own, Bretskopf," he declared. "The French are more subtle, the English more self-conscious. Over here we do not use words which might offend. To continue, however, I eat too much. If I were not possessed of such a wealth of energy it would affect my music — not that anything could really do that. The artist in me would live and triumph even if my body grew coarse."

Bretskopf, pale and heavy, with light-coloured eyes, a typical Russian in appearance, scowled once more across the table.

"You people over here weary me," he said. "In our councils, even our daily life at Barcelona, we have but one thought — the work. Here you with your music, and Pennington with his golf and society, Pritchard and Frankland with their women, why one wonders how we progress at all!"

"There was never a revolution without women," Frankland murmured.

"There's too much eating and drinking and talk to my mind," Thornton pronounced sullenly. "Who wants to sit down and fill his stomach in times like these?"

Malakoff pushed away his empty plate and sipped his wine critically.

"No man fights the worse or thinks the worse for being well fed," he declared. "You, my friend Thornton, are a hard worker, you are very much in earnest, but you are too gloomy."

"I take risks that none of you others do," was the glum reply. "You all tinker with the law; I break it."

A waiter entered and the conversation ceased. Pritchard spoke of the threatened coal strike. Bretskopf leaned across from his place and struck the table with his fist.

"You and your strikes!" he exclaimed. "In my centre with every strike we draw a little nearer to our goal. With you it is always the same — compromise — blasted compromise! Your Welshmen haven't the guts of rabbits. They get a pat on the back, a bob or two extra, and off goes the capitalist to Monte Carlo, leaving them to sweat their insides out for him all over again. Damn it, it isn't wages you want to fight for. It's the bloody mines. So long as you accept the principle of a capitalist and mine owner doling out weekly pay to labour, whatever that pay may be, you're moving no further forward, you're accepting a rotten principle. I came over here expecting to find everything shaping towards the real end of things. What do I find? Talk of compromise, subsidies, increase in wages. Hell! Your Trades Unions have got the dry rot."

"Bretskopf is right to some extent," Frankland admitted. "I'll tell you what the trouble is. It's the Labour Party, as they call themselves. They've gone mooning off the deep end. What the hell's the use of 'em to-day? They do nothing for the working man. They're the slaves of the *bourgeoisie*. We had a Socialist Government. What happened? They carried on. Look at Macpherson. Talked the right sort of stuff in the old days. What

is he now? *Bourgeois* right through. Not a drop of red blood in him. Look at your Trades Union leaders and secretaries, hear them talk at their blasted congress. They're all tarred with the same brush. They draw their thousand a year, buy their houses, and settle down to comfort. They think they've done their job if they keep wages up. To hell with wages!"

Bretskopf glowered approval across the table.

"Ask them in Russia what they think of the English Labour Party," he scoffed. "They're the greatest enemy to progress the free thinking man has to-day. They've gone under. They haven't a practical revolutionary scheme in their programme."

"You're right," Frankland agreed. "I'm the deputy leader of the Communist Party and I'm proud of it. I ask you how do I stand with the Labour Party? Outside the pale, I tell you. Moderation, conciliation, that's the tosh we get chucked to us all the time. We try to show our comrades what freedom should be — every man his own master — mines and industries managed by committees of workmen. Labour looks down its nose in the House now when we preach the right sort of stuff."

"You let too many blasted journalists into Russia," Malakoff reminded him cynically. "You got into a filthy mess there and you've let the world know it. It's those Americans who've done the business. They seem to forget that American papers are read in England."

"Was there ever a great cause in the world," Pritchard demanded grandiloquently, "that sprang from seed into blossom in a night? The development of our principles may take longer than we thought, but it will come. The fruits are there in Russia, smeared with failure, if you will, through bad leadership, through a few false tenets, injured by an ill-advised nomenclature — Bolshevism. Who thought of the word, I wonder? Foul!"

"My message to you all," Bretskopf declared, "is this. The French Revolution was brought about by the aristocrats themselves. They gibed and flouted the people into it until they kindled a heat which carried everything before it. England's no country for that sort of thing. It isn't a country of aristocrats any longer. The peerage is three parts tradesmen, and the tradesman is the worst enemy of our cause, worse even than the aristocrat. What you've got to do here is to strike at the comfort of the middle classes. We've got to go back to the old scheme. You've got to bring the leaders of the different Trades Unions under your thumb so that you can strike just when and where you please. The wharfingers, railways, mines, — just what's going to hurt most at the moment. Have nothing to do with prime ministers and conferences. Keep your leaders away from Downing Street, quote no terms until the end, and then up with the Red Flag."

"The man speaks some sense," Malakoff admitted. "What about the Army, Thornton?"

The man addressed looked up with a dangerous glitter in his eyes. He had eaten and drunk sparingly and he had taken no part in the conversation.

"I am doing my job," he said, a little sombrely. "Last night, whilst you all slept in your beds, I was round Camberley, Farnham and Woking way. I pinned a thousand of our latest messages on the trunks of trees all round the camps — a thousand, mind you, and I'm doing something of the sort every day — I — Thornton — ex-sergeant in the Guards, V. C.! Do you know what would happen to me if I were found? Bow Street first. Then the Military would ask for me — Court Martial, all over in ten minutes, muffled drums and a volley. I've seen it happen to others pretty often during the war. You fellows aren't taking on much of that sort of thing."

"I'm not so sure," Malakoff observed, pouring himself

out some wine. "If Dessiter had lived another twenty-four hours, or if his stuff had ever reached Downing Street, I fancy it would have been Bow Street for some of us."

"Colonel Dessiter was the most dangerous man to our cause who ever worked for the Government," Pritchard declared. "Somehow or other he got underneath. Lucky for us that Kroogner stuck to him, though he paid for it with his life, poor chap."

Malakoff nodded gloomily.

"I ought to know all about Dessiter," he remarked. "Every one of our Continental branches was in a panic. He practically ruined our great coup in Bucharest, and Rome nearly closed down."

"Dessiter was the worst enemy our cause has ever known," Pennington declared, leaning back in his chair. "Personally, although we have done everything that is possible through this branch, I can't feel that we shall be out of the wood until we have that notebook in our possession."

The service of dinner had drawn to an end and the waiters had left the room. Coffee and liqueurs were upon the table, and every one was smoking. Conversation became more intimate. Pritchard had squared his chair round to the table. He was the Chairman of the Branch and there were matters later on for official discussion.

"They've got nervous already in Downing Street," he observed, as he began to arrange his papers. "I told the Prime Minister myself yesterday that if he really thought of appointing a commission to discuss the mining question, we might come together, but nationalisation must be one of the subjects to be discussed. We gave way last time; we weren't ready. This time we damned nearly are, especially if Thornton's work has been well done. I tell you, if we once get to talking nationalisation, the fire will

begin to burn all right. Macpherson and his lot will have to come in with us, and we shall hear the Red Flag sung in Westminster Abbey within the next twelve months. There's a clear road to it then — coal strike, railway and transport strike, Army transport waggons not available, and, by God, we shall have Park Lane marching to Bethnal Green Road to pray for food. However, this is all general business. This belongs to the main body. We mustn't forget we've got a job of our own to carry on. I've got some reports here ——"

There was a knock at the door. Pritchard looked up with a frown.

"Who the hell's that?" he demanded.

A waiter brought in a note.

"A young gentleman is waiting downstairs, sir," he announced. "Said it was most important. They've sent him on here from Westminster."

Pritchard tore open the envelope and read the note. His frown deepened.

"Send him up," he directed.

"Who is it?" Malakoff enquired.

"It's the bank clerk from South Audley Street," Pritchard explained. "He's been to see Caldwell — been waiting there for hours — and Caldwell has sent him on here. I shouldn't be surprised if he had brought the book. If he has, that's the end of our anxieties."

A frightened-looking young man with flaxen hair and pince-nez was ushered into the room. Pritchard greeted him brusquely.

"What's the trouble?" he asked. "Sit down and tell us about it."

The young man appeared out of breath. He accepted the chair, however, and glanced a little doubtfully around.

"You can speak out," Pritchard assured him. "What's the trouble? Have you brought the packet?"

"I haven't had a chance," the newcomer explained nervously. "I doubt whether I ever shall have. There's something wrong down at the bank. I'm not sure that they haven't tumbled to it."

"What do you mean?" Pritchard asked sharply.

The young man wiped the perspiration from his forehead. A month ago he had been exactly according to pattern — a respectable, plodding young man, well-established in suburban social circles, a shining light of the tennis club, an embryo golfer, one of the M.C.s of the fortnightly subscription dances held at the Balham Institute. There was a girl, the chance of a rise next month, the management of a small branch always amongst the possibilities. All gone. A moment's subtle temptation, and now everything drifting away, the ground crumbling beneath his feet, all that smug but happy future fading into the clouds.

"I'd got the real packet in the next compartment to the dummy one," he recounted. "I didn't have a chance to get away with it before closing time. During the last few days, Hubbard — that's our manager — seems to have had the jumps. He won't allow any one down in the vaults alone. He always sends two of us. I've tried all I could to break loose, but not a chance. I tried yesterday when Hubbard went out to lunch, but Grewcock — that's his deputy — came scowling up to me and asked what the devil I wanted breaking rules. Of course I had an excuse for wanting to go down, but it didn't help me. Yesterday they sent me to the City. When I came back I found there'd been no end of a fuss. Some one from Scotland Yard had been with the boss. I heard them saying that it was the Chief Commissioner himself, and that he'd brought some one from the Home Office. Whilst they were there, Hubbard visited the vaults himself. Just before closing time I had to go down to sort

out some deeds. Mr. Grewcock went with me. The dummy packet which was in the compartment labelled 'Miss Brown' had gone."

"And what about the real one?" Pritchard demanded, his voice shaking with anxiety.

"That was there all right," the clerk replied. "I could see it through the wire doors. I put it in an empty compartment under 'C' instead of 'B'."

"Why the hell couldn't you bring it?" Pritchard exclaimed.

"How could I?" the young man asked, almost piteously. "Grewcock never let me out of his sight. It would have given the whole show away if I'd opened the other compartment. Besides, I'd nowhere to hide it. I did try to stay behind, but I hadn't a chance. Grewcock never took his eyes off me. Usually it is I who lock up there. This afternoon he did it himself. I can't think why they're so suspicious, but there's something — I swear there's something wrong there."

"Were you at the bank until closing time?" Pritchard demanded.

"An hour after. I'm behind with my work. I can't settle down with this infernal business hanging about. That didn't make any difference though. The keys of the vault had gone already."

"The packet is still there then," Pritchard reflected. "There's no doubt about that."

"It's still there," the other agreed. "But don't you see? By this time the people who've got the dummy packet will have found out. I sha'n't dare to go to the bank in the morning. I wish to God I'd never come into this."

"Oh, shut up!" Pritchard exclaimed brutally. "You've got a couple of thousand pounds in cash — more than you'd have ever earned there if you'd slaved over your

desk until doomsday. You can be off when you like, and there's no charge against you either. You haven't stolen anything — you've just broken trust. You'd better clear out, if you can't get the packet. My God, if we'd had a man on the job ——!"

The young clerk rose to his feet.

"I never promised to do more than I have done," he declared, with a trace of spirit. "I didn't mean to do as much. I came here to tell you how things were of my own accord. I wasn't obliged to."

"That's right," Pritchard agreed in a milder tone. "Have a drink and a cigar."

The young man drank a whisky and soda greedily.

"Then we may take it as an absolute certainty," Malakoff intervened, with a meaning glance at Bretskopf, "that the original packet is in the safe in South Audley Street and will be there until opening time to-morrow morning?"

"An absolute certainty," the other assented. "No one went down to the vaults again after Grewcock and I came out, and when I left the bank the keys had gone and the watchman was on duty."

Pritchard nodded.

"Well, we know where we are, at any rate, then," he said. "We won't detain you any longer. If you'd like a letter to some friends on the Continent — that is if you want a job of any sort ——"

"My God, no!" the young man interrupted. "No more of this sort of business for me!"

He hastened off. Pritchard sat with his under lip thrust out thinking deeply. Difficulties made a stronger man of him. From across the table, Bretskopf, with folded arms, watched him steadily, a triumphant gleam of anticipation already shining in his eyes.

CHAPTER XVI

At a few minutes after nine o'clock on the following morning, Miss Brown, who had just finished clearing up after her simple breakfast, was surprised to hear a tap at her door. She answered the summons and found a young man standing, hat in hand, upon the threshold, whom at first she scarcely recognised.

"I hope you haven't forgotten me, Miss Brown?" he said. "My name is Greatson — Eric Greatson, you know. I am Abel Deane's secretary. We danced at the Cosmopolitan one night."

"I remember you now," Miss Brown admitted. "But ——"

"Of course I know I'm intruding, coming at this hour of the morning," he interrupted eagerly, "but I want just one word with you, please. It is most important."

She allowed him to pass into the room a little ungraciously. Although she had only been up an hour, her bed was already made, the window had been opened, and the room itself was the picture of neatness. Nevertheless, Miss Brown had strict ideas with regard to the reception of visitors of the other sex.

"It must be only one word then," she insisted. "Neither my friend nor I receive visitors here. What is it you want, please?"

He fidgeted with his hat. Miss Brown stood before him, cold and inhospitable. Knowing what a feeble explanation he must offer, he realised how hopeless his task was likely to prove.

"Miss Brown," he began, "I am compelled to remind you of something I know you don't wish to discuss. You

have become involved in a matter which you do not understand in the least. It isn't your affair. You have been forced and cajoled into taking unfair risks in life."

Miss Brown's manner was as frigid as the wind that was whistling down the entry into the street outside.

"It appears to me," she said, "that you are interfering in a matter which is entirely my own concern. Please do not proceed any further."

"But I've got to," he persisted. "I can assure you I hate my errand. I wouldn't have come if there wasn't a grave reason for it. Some one — you, I believe — is going to a bank in South Audley Street this morning to fetch away a packet which has been deposited there. I don't want you to go. I am here to stop your going if I can."

Miss Brown's blue eyes were large now with astonishment. She forgot for a moment to be angry. She looked at her visitor incredulously.

"You are here to stop my going to the bank about my own business this morning?" she repeated. "Have you suddenly taken leave of your senses, Mr. Greatson?"

"I daresay I have, to some extent," he groaned, "or I should have let things take their own course. I've been awake most of the night wondering what to do. I hoped that perhaps you might listen to me if you realised that I was in earnest. Do you believe that I am in earnest, Miss Brown?"

"I daresay you are," she admitted, "but that doesn't make any difference. I shall not tell you whether I am going to the bank or not. I will only tell you this in the hope of getting rid of you at once: if I have already planned to go, nothing that you could say would stop me. Do you want me to add that I resent interference from strangers? If I take advice it is from my friends."

He looked at her with a pathetic little furrow of the brows.

"You are making me feel," he remarked, "that there is nothing left for me to do but to go down on all fours and crawl out."

"Then why don't you do it?" she asked.

"Because I want, if I can, to convince you that mine isn't just idle interest," he said earnestly. "Serious harm is likely to happen to you if you go down to the bank this morning on the errand which I know you are contemplating."

"And how do you know of this?" she demanded. "How do you even come to know that I was thinking of going to the bank?"

"I learned it by accident, because I went down to a meeting of one of the sub-committees of our party with a message from Mr. Deane last night," he explained. "The Chief wanted Frankland down at the House, and I had to go there to fetch him. What was going on at the Committee meeting, I cannot tell you in detail. I am breaking confidence enough as it is when I beg you, as you value your life, not to leave this room until after ten this morning. It isn't your affair. It's a cowardly thing to expose you, who are not concerned in any way, to a very real danger."

"I suppose you mean," she said icily, "that some of your friends and associates are planning some sort of brutality to prevent my carrying out my duty."

"It isn't your duty," he protested. "It's not your concern. And as for my associates, I am not responsible for what they do. We have a cause to fight, and it must be fought in the way our Chiefs decide."

"Are your friends then," she asked, "proposing to assault me? They have tried it once before, you know. A nice sort of way to conduct a campaign which is supposed to be in the cause of humanity!"

"Don't gibe, please," he begged.

"Well, you can set your mind at rest," she assured him. "I am not going to the bank alone."

He shook his head.

"It won't make any difference."

She glanced at the clock.

"Mr. Greatson," she said, "I have given you as much of my time as I can spare. You are an intruder here. Please leave me."

"Will you promise me this then," he pleaded —"it isn't much to ask? Will you wait until five minutes past ten before you leave here?"

"I will make no promise of any sort," she answered. "Whatever my plans may be, — and I shall not tell you what they are — I shall carry them out to the letter, and I don't care a fig about you and your assassins and your dirty underhand way of conducting your affairs. You may mean well yourself — I don't care whether you do or not — but I hate you all."

He turned away. He was a young man of understanding, and he knew that he had as much chance of moving Miss Brown as one of the Pyramids.

"I am sorry," he said simply. "Please remember my last words to you. Any one in the world might be five minutes late in keeping an appointment. I haven't come here for nothing. Please believe that."

She watched him from the window cross the road and disappear in the alley, walking slowly and apparently deep in thought. Then she put on her hat, hesitated for a moment over her choice of outer garments, and finally, although it was raining a little, discarded the brown mackintosh and slipped on the fur coat. She glanced at the clock as she settled down to wait. It was twenty minutes to ten.

At ten minutes to ten precisely things began to happen. A limousine car drew up outside from which two stolid-

looking men descended and proceeded to an apparently casual but close investigation of the immediate neighbourhood. It seemed to Miss Brown that a couple of loiterers who had been arguing outside the photographer's shop opposite, faded away. Another pedestrian, however, a typical street lounger, came slouching along the pavement and stood looking at the car. The chauffeur watched him keenly.

"Move on there," he ordered, in a surprisingly official tone.

The man only grinned. Suddenly, with a quickness of which he had seemed scarcely capable, he drew from his coat pocket a jack-knife with the blade already open, and deliberately stabbed into the tyre at which he was gazing. Twice he achieved his object, and his arm was raised for the third time when the nearer of the two attendants who had been watching the car seized him by the collar. There was the shrill summons of a police whistle, and as Miss Brown stepped on to the pavement a policeman came hurrying round the corner.

"What is it?" Miss Brown asked breathlessly.

"Nothing much, Miss," one of the men replied, touching his hat. "Get on with the job, Williams," he ordered the chauffeur, who was already unfastening one of the spare wheels. "Nothing that will detain us more than five minutes, Miss. I don't know whether this fellow's mad or what his game is. He stabbed one of our tyres."

The policeman took the misdemeanant, who made not the slightest effort to escape, into custody. His captor breathed a word into the former's ear and was at once greeted with a salute.

"I'll come along quite quietly," the offender promised. "I don't want to get away neither. You needn't grab me as though I was a criminal. I just stabbed that there tyre. That's all I done."

"What did you do it for?"

The man grinned, showing a line of yellow, horrible teeth.

"Ten quid," he answered, "and I'd have had a go at the b . . . . y lot for half the money. 'Willful damage,' that's all they can charge me with. If I get a week in quod I'll have a damn good spree when I get out."

"Who gave you the ten quid?" the other demanded sternly.

The man grinned once more.

"Come to think of it," he remarked, "there might be a bit more in this for me. Look 'ere, guv'nor, how much for a description of the bloke what forked out the ten quid?"

His questioner turned to the policeman.

"Where shall you take him?" he inquired.

"Marlborough Street, sir."

"See that he is kept there until I turn up," was the brief command.

"I'll see to it, sir."

The prisoner was marched away. A plain clothes attendant escorted Miss Brown to the car.

"The chauffeur will have the new wheel on directly," he assured her. "We shall only be a few minutes behind time at the bank. And you needn't be nervous, madam. You won't notice them, perhaps, but we've a score of men around the bank."

"I am not in the least nervous," Miss Brown said composedly, as she took her place in the car. "I very seldom am. I was just wondering who had given that man ten pounds just to delay us these few minutes, and why?"

"We'll get to the bottom of that. If you'll allow me, madam, I'll sit inside with you, and accompany you across the pavement."

Miss Brown welcomed him with a smile as he stepped in.

"Thank you very much," she answered.

Nevertheless, Miss Brown was not escorted across the pavement to the doors of the bank that morning.

The car had already turned into South Audley Street when the greyness of the December sky overhead was suddenly split by what seemed to be a tremendous sheet of lightning. Miss Brown grasped her companion's arm in frank amazement. Her lips were parted to utter some exclamation of wonder when there was a roar as though the earth underneath were opening all around them. The street itself seemed to be rocking, the car gave a violent swerve, and a taxicab just in front ran up the kerb and crashed into the wall of a house. Miss Brown thrust her head through the shattered window, gripping the side of the car with both hands, and looked upon the most extraordinary sight of her life. A little ahead on the left-hand side was what had once been the bank. There were flames of lightning still shooting into the air, a lava of masonry going up like a bunch of rockets in all manner of shapes to descend again making hideous havoc of the street and everything upon which they fell. A fragment of a marble pillar came down on a boy on a bicycle, and Miss Brown closed her eyes. The two nearest standard lamps were twisted round and round as though some nervous giant had been playing with them in his fingers. The front door of the bank remained, curiously enough, standing, and through the framework was a glimpse of a great pit, a counter upheaved against the crumbling wall, with not a fragment of roof left. Upon the pavement were a number of black objects lying in quaint shapes. Miss Brown suddenly realised what they were and drew in her head with a little sob. Her escort, who had stepped out into the road, looked in through the window. Even he was obviously shaken.

"It's a terrible job this, Miss," he announced. "I've

told the chauffeur to drive you straight back to Shepherd's Market."

"What is it? An explosion?" she faltered.

"Bombs," he confided. "I've seen this sort of thing in Madrid and Barcelona — saw the first one — a clumsy affair it was too — in Petersburg, when I was a lad. He's taking you back to your rooms, Miss. Don't look out of the window again. I'll bring you word what's happened presently."

"I'm perfectly all right," Miss Brown assured him. "It wouldn't be any use going on, I suppose?"

"Not the slightest. The place is all in ruins and I doubt whether there's a clerk alive."

Miss Brown half closed her eyes and was driven back to her rooms, passing crowds of hurrying spectators. She let herself in, closed the door and sat down in her easy-chair. Then she began to be aware of something inside her which she failed at first to understand. She wasn't sure whether she had taken her hat off or not, and her coat — she had to feel whether it was there. There were sobs tearing at her throat, her eyes seemed to be burning. She was shaking all over. She saw again the boy on the bicycle, those grotesque objects upon the pavement and in the road. Miss Brown had hysteria.

CHAPTER XVII

At a few minutes after four that afternoon, Miss Brown, piloted by the stalwart *commissionaire* who had fetched her, mounted in the lift to the topmost floor of the great building in Whitehall, climbed the final flight of stairs and was ushered into the stronghold which had become Dessiter's temporary home. He welcomed her with a faint, mirthless smile.

"Nerves shaken up?" he enquired.

"I haven't been feeling very well," she admitted. "You see, I was near enough ——"

He checked her kindly.

"I know all about it," he interrupted. "It was a very terrible affair. Now, will you open that packet upon the table?"

She gave a little cry. There it was, neatly tied up in brown paper with a great red seal in one corner and a knot in the string which she remembered perfectly well. She cut the fastenings at once, with a pair of scissors which he handed to her. A single glance was sufficient.

"My book!" she exclaimed. "The real one! The letters are here, too, in the pocket!"

He nodded.

"It was handed over to an agent of mine an hour ago," he confided. "The vaults were almost untouched. Do you feel like hearing exactly what did happen?"

"Please."

"It appears that as soon as the doors of the bank were opened, a man who had driven up in a taxicab entered, with a cheque in one hand and a black bag in the

other. He set down the cheque upon the counter, stooped down and opened the black bag, and threw three hand bombs. There were seven clerks in the bank, four of whom were blown to pieces. The other three had marvellous escapes. Outside, two of my men were killed, four or five passers-by, and a boy on a bicycle. A number of other people were injured. One satisfactory thing about the affair is that the bank clerk who must have been in league with our friends was one of those who were killed. Barricades were put up around the building in a very short time, and a thorough investigation made amongst the débris. The vaults were scarcely touched, and an hour ago your packet was handed over to a representative of the Home Office."

Miss Brown asked only one question.

"What became of the man who threw the bombs?"

"There wasn't enough left of him for identification," Dessiter replied drily.

She drew off her gloves and fingered the book lovingly.

"Before you start," he said, "I want one of the addresses I gave you."

She opened out the list. He looked over her shoulder and nodded thoughtfully, as he placed his forefinger upon one.

"Lopez and Samuel, Barcelona," he murmured, "Consigners to Messrs. Anderson, 17a, East Thames Wharf, Branch Warehouse, 133b, Tooley Street."

He crossed the room to the telephone and spoke for several minutes to an official at Scotland Yard. Then he returned to the table. Miss Brown had already removed her coat, hat and gloves and was seated before the typewriter.

"Any copies?" she asked.

"Two," he directed. "Don't hurry. You're as safe here as in the vaults of the Bank of England."

Miss Brown propped up her book, glanced through the first few lines, pushed back a somewhat refractory coil of her silky brown hair, lingered for a moment with her hands poised over the keys, and then started upon her task. Soon her fingers became the purely mechanical instruments of her will. Once more she passed into the wonderful world which she had envisaged so many times since that memorable night. She felt the amazing thrill of it, the palpitating records of journeyings undertaken under circumstances where escape from death seemed almost impossible. One sentence in particular thrilled her again as it had done at the first dictation:

It was my wish to have taken Benskopf alive, as he was reported to be in possession of the whole Chinese propaganda scheme bearing the official stamp of the Russian Government, and with special notes in the handwriting of a high official directing that Great Britain should be considered the chief enemy of the movement. The woman, however, with whom I had danced a few minutes before was, as I had discovered then, armed, and Benskopf himself was drawing. I could have held him covered, but the woman would have dropped me. It was she who had killed the Frenchman, Mercier, who was reported to have committed suicide in the India House Hotel only the week before. I shot Benskopf, taking care to kill, and disarmed the woman only just in time. She tried the usual tactics, and it took me an hour to manœuvre her to the café in the square behind, where I had a member of the —— Police waiting. The woman was one of the most dangerous agents of the International Communist Society, and I handed to Sir E., our Minister, on the following morning, proofs of her identity and complicity in a list of crimes which he duly presented to the Government. Chiefly owing to the disorder in the City and to urgent representations from Sir E., the woman was shot on the following afternoon.

Miss Brown paused for a moment. She looked out at the high, uncurtained window, so high that only the reflected glow of the City was visible in the clouds, and, above, the stars. Those last few curt words which her fingers had struck into type haunted her. "The woman was shot on the following afternoon." At his desk, with his profile turned to her, Dessiter was seated. She remembered his tone when he had dictated those few words, cold, unemotional, with a faint undernote of satisfaction as though with a task well accomplished. Miss Brown shuddered. She was doing her best to adapt herself to her new environment, but these things were not of the world in which she had lived.

"Getting on?" Dessiter asked without looking up.

She struck the keys once more.

"Quite well," she answered.

For an hour she worked with nimble, obedient fingers, whilst the story of wonder and fierce adventures fell into page after page of black type under her eyes. Then again her pace slackened and her eyes sought the vision in the murky sky:

I had been directed to a house in a notorious quarter of Shanghai which I visited as arranged. I imagined my disguise perfect, but the woman who lit my opium pipe was Fan-te-shi, famous throughout the district as the sometime mistress of Kreslemn, the First Secretary in Shanghai of the International Communist League. I could see her watching me through her slits of eyes, and once, under pretext of stroking my hand, she looked at my finger nails. When she got up to go I knew what purpose was in her mind, and I drew her back. I took her into my confidence, told her what she had already guessed. In the end she accepted a thousand taels and she introduced me to Kreslemn himself as a merchant of importance from an up river settlement. I announced

myself as a reactionary having a son a student, and was invited to the meeting that night. It was there I first heard the propaganda directed especially against the British, and from the lips of an extraordinarily able Chinese student heard the principles of communism, adapted to Chinese needs, expounded red hot from Moscow. I gathered that after my departure — which, owing to a chance word I overheard, was rather hurried — my *bona fides* were questioned, and shortly afterwards Fan-te-shi disappeared. A Chinaman passing through the next street, who declared that he came from the province which I had claimed, was found dead in the street the next morning.

Cold words, set down in solid black type. Not a syllable to add to their dramatic import, not a line to create background or atmosphere, yet unimaginative Miss Brown seemed to see it all — the underground room with its sickening odours, the singsong voices, the rustling of loose garments and the patter of soft feet, the suspicious glances; Dessiter himself, threading his way through the labyrinths of the quarter seeking safety, with his hand underneath his loosely flowing coat upon the butt of his automatic, listening for the footsteps of a follower, knowing that any moment might come the flash of steel before his eyes. And the genuine Chinaman accosted by two wayfarers, questioned as to his business there, unlucky in his replies, lying on his back a moment later with a knife in his chest, wondering with his passing breath, with true Oriental fatalism, whence and wherefore had come the death blow.

"Going all right?" Dessiter asked again.

And again Miss Brown nodded. Again she bent over her cabalistic signs and her fingers flashed under the green shaded light. Back to Europe now, back to more sordid surroundings where tragedy moved unaccompanied by

romance. There was one paragraph even here though full of vivid reality:

The woman posing as a Polish princess was everywhere received, and her house was the *rendezvous* of all Bucharest. She was in reality the mistress of a famous Russian leader of the people, and was working entirely at his bidding, as I learned from letters which came into my possession, and which I passed on just in time to the Chief of the Police. There is very little doubt that in another week or so she would have succeeded in her campaign. The cathedral and the royal palace would both have been blown up, and with the armed mob of peasants once in the City the revolution would have become an accomplished fact. The so-called princess shot herself when she realised that the police were at the door.

The task was completed at last. There were twenty-nine sheets of foolscap, a list of names, a list of addresses and a packet of letters. She pinned the former together with careful fingers whilst Dessiter came and stood over her. Two copies he folded up and locked away in the safe, together with the packet of letters. The third he placed in a long envelope, scribbled a few lines of enclosure and carefully sealed the flap. Then he spoke down the telephone.

"In case any one should arrive for that envelope before you leave, Miss Brown," he said, "it would be better for you not to appear to recognise him even if you do. There are times just now when it is dangerous for Mahomet to go to the mountain, so the mountain comes in from Downing Street. How much have you understood, I wonder, of what you have been transcribing?"

"I have understood a certain amount, of course," Miss Brown admitted. "I am very ignorant though of politics

and social questions. Sometimes the papers seem to be trying to frighten us, but I have never believed — I don't think any ordinary person does really — that there was any real chance of a revolution in this country."

"I don't think there is now," he agreed. "We shall strike first. On the other hand, I am able actually to prove what was really meant behind all this foreign propaganda. We have absolute proof, there, of treason on the part of British Members of Parliament. It is up to the Government to act, of course. If they don't, they have only themselves to thank for what may happen."

"I think I ought to tell you," she said, after a moment's hesitation, "that there is one name I've noticed — the name of a man I know."

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Noel Frankland. I met him with a Mr. Eric Greatson."

"How did you come across them?"

"The girl I share my bed-sitting-room with came up from the country one night a few weeks ago," she confided. "She was very depressed, and we dined together at the Cosmopolitan. These two men were opposite, and Mr. Frankland asked her to dance. Then his friend came over and spoke to me."

"So you do that sort of thing?" he asked with brusque contempt.

"I have never done it before," she answered, the colour rising in her cheeks, "neither, I believe, has my friend. She finds her life in the country very dull, and she wanted very badly to dance. It was the night I met Mr. Paul, who is a professional dancer there and seemed to know who I was, and spoke to me about you."

"Paul is a dear good fellow," Dessiter declared. "He was at Lombertson Square after you were there — the night I died," he added, with a little chuckle. "I have

nothing against young Greatson either. He has his convictions and he lives up to them. He is one of those theorists who make an impossible cause seem possible until it comes to putting it into practice. Frankland, on the other hand, is a man to be mistrusted. He poses as being between the two sections of the Party, but at heart he is an extremist, and unscrupulous."

"There is something else which I must tell you," Miss Brown continued. "This morning, Mr. Greatson came to my rooms."

"He visits you there?" Dessiter exclaimed abruptly.

"He has never been near them before. Neither my friend nor I receive any visitors there. He came to beg me not to go to the bank."

"So he knew!" Dessiter muttered. "That's news to me. I thought that what they call the Action Branch was supposed to run their business entirely apart from the general party."

"I suppose he must have known," Miss Brown conceded reluctantly. "I absolutely refused to change my plans. Then, whilst I was getting into the car, a man came up and stabbed the tyre."

"I heard of that," Dessiter reflected.

"It made us between five and ten minutes late in starting. I suppose that is the only reason I wasn't blown to pieces."

Her eyes met Dessiter's. For a man whose acquaintance with women and their ways was scant, he was swift to realise their faint gleam of reproach. He smiled at her very kindly.

"Please don't believe that I haven't thought of that," he begged. "Your safety was my first question, my first thought."

She flushed a little, absurdly pleased.

"I suppose you thought I ought to have mentioned it

directly you came in," he went on. "Well, it was there, where it should have been. The words were almost on my lips. Then I saw how perfectly self-composed you were, and I left it. There's a fever about this work, you know!"

"I know," she murmured.

"So young Greatson is an admirer?" he continued after a moment's pause. "Isn't that what it is called in your world?"

"If he is, he has not mentioned it," Miss Brown replied. "What is it called in your world, Colonel Dessiter?"

"How the devil do I know?" he retorted testily. "You have a fair idea of what my life has been like during the last two or three years. Do you think there has been any time for philandering in it?"

Miss Brown considered the matter composedly.

"One can scarcely tell," she decided. "These are the records, I imagine, of your public work, not of your private life."

"They are the records of both," he snapped.

"This Fan-te-shi," Miss Brown murmured, with her eyes upon the ceiling. "She appears to have been an acquaintance."

"Of course she was. Women like that are damned useful. One drinks with them and flirts with them, gives them bonbons and jewellery. Occasionally one learns what one wants from them."

"It seems a little brutal to care for women only for what you can get out of them," she remarked.

"What the devil are you cross-questioning me for?" he demanded.

Miss Brown was suddenly confused. When she came to think it over she was horrified at herself. She rose to her feet.

"If there is no more typing," she began ——

"Sit down," he interrupted.

Miss Brown, notwithstanding her new humility, hesitated. She withdrew the hand she had stretched out for her coat, but she did not sit down.

"Listen," he went on. "I've been wanting an opportunity to talk to you. You're in this thing now. I had to trust some one when I thought I might be going to die, and by good luck it turned out to be you. Are you willing to stay in?"

"Please explain," Miss Brown begged, with a little flutter at her heart.

"As my secretary. I've got an official department now, you know, and yours will be a semi-official appointment. Three hundred a year, and your keep when we're travelling, pension if you stay long enough, and compensation to your relatives if you get it in the neck like I nearly did. What are you hesitating about?"

"I didn't like being sworn at just now," Miss Brown ventured.

"You shouldn't have been so damned irritating then," was the blunt reply.

She had a retort ready, but it remained unuttered. There was a twinkle in his eyes, a curve at the corners of his lips which seemed suddenly to humanise her prospective employer. Miss Brown felt very weak and very acquiescent. She sat down.

"I didn't really hesitate," she confided. "There is nothing I should like so much in the world as to be your secretary, and go on with the work."

He came over and laid his hand gently upon her shoulder.

"That's all right then," he said. "I'll try to keep you out of mischief, but you won't mind if there's a certain amount of risk now and then?"

She lifted her blue eyes to his.

"I sha'n't mind at all," she promised. "I'm not really a coward."

"If I didn't know that," he growled, as he touched the bell upon his way back to his easy-chair, "I shouldn't be making you this offer. Nine o'clock to-morrow morning, please, and bring some clothes. You may be going out of town."

"What sort of clothes?"

"How the de — mischief should I know what you wear?" he answered. "I beg your pardon — I mean, how should I know? Bring anything."

"Am I going to China?" she ventured.

"No, Camberley."

CHAPTER XVIII

Miss Brown arrived home, escorted again, somewhat to her discomfort, in a government car, to find Frances in pronounced negligée, lying upon her bed, smoking a cigarette and reading the evening paper.

"Once more," the latter confessed, throwing down the newspaper and stretching herself, "the chickens have been too many for me. I need an antidote. What is the natural antidote, Edith, to feeding chickens and disposing of their dismembered remains?"

"Dancing, dining and flirting, I suppose," Miss Brown observed, taking off her coat.

Frances raised herself lazily, and with her hands clasped behind her head, looked across the room.

"Edith," she murmured, "sometimes your intelligence astonishes me."

"Are you dining with Mr. Frankland?"

"I am not. To tell you the truth, my vanity is a little piqued. Mr. Frankland has raised the siege. He hasn't been down this week or written."

"So much the better," Miss Brown declared severely. "I call him a most objectionable person."

"So do I, as a matter of fact," Frances yawned. "He thinks of nothing else except his wretched speeches and his influence with the working classes. I don't like men who are too much in earnest about anything in life except me. If only some nice man knew," she reflected, "how unsettled I am, how receptive, how easy a victim I should be to any one with a little affection to give and a little tact to use in the displaying of it, why I think I should be besieged. I have a new grey frock, Edith — it's really

that new shade of smoke colour — all the things that go with it, and some silk stockings to match I bought coming up from the station. You could put it all in a handkerchief case, and I have a coiffeur coming here in exactly twenty minutes. Can we get a cocktail for him? It's the great Maurice, and I hear he never goes twice to a place unless he's offered a cocktail."

"Not a drop of alcohol on the premises," Miss Brown replied. "You know that, Frances. Could he do my hair as well?"

"He'd make an awful mess of it," Frances assured her. "These hairdressers have no knack of handling fine, simple hair like yours. I shouldn't let him touch it if I were you. The way you arrange it yourself, with those baby blue eyes underneath and your funny demure little mouth gives you individuality at any rate. You mayn't be striking-looking, Miss Brown, but if any one takes the trouble to look at you — well, you're quite worth it. Can I have a bath?"

"You can if you have threepence to put in the slot."

Frances swung herself off the bed.

"I've been reading about this awful outrage in South Audley Street," she observed. "Did you hear it?"

"Yes, I heard the explosion," Miss Brown admitted. "Every one did round here. A great many windows were broken in Curzon Street."

"The police seem to have been pretty clever about it," Frances went on. "They've found the factory already where the bombs have been stored — raided it this evening."

"Was it in Tooley Street?"

"How the mischief did you know? You've seen the stop press of the *Evening Standard*, I suppose."

Miss Brown shook her head.

"I heard something about it before I left my work,"

she admitted. "And I'm not sure that it was the police who were so clever after all. Many arrests?"

"Not one yet. The warehouse was deserted and the man who threw the bombs was blown into small pieces. It seems a senseless sort of affair."

Miss Brown shivered a little.

"Go and have your bath," she suggested. "I may have one afterwards whilst your coiffeur's here."

"Go and have yours first. The man will be furious if I keep him waiting, and you know how I like to stew."

Miss Brown dutifully departed. When she reappeared clad in her dressing gown, the coiffeur had already arrived. With the necessity of a suspended *toilette* before her, she curled herself up in an easy-chair. The coiffeur, who was in his way a celebrity of the neighbourhood, had a great deal to say about the morning's excitement.

"Felt the ground rock beneath my feet," he told them both. "I was shaving a customer — a thing I don't often do, but it was Lord Ritchley, a very old client. I very nearly cut him, too — a misfortune that hasn't happened to me for fifteen years. You've heard the latest, I suppose?"

"We've heard nothing except what's in the papers," Frances confessed.

Maurice assumed an air of mystery.

"Anarchists," he confided. "There's a regular gang of them about. They say they're going to do in all the West End banks one after the other. Some of the Communist members got a hot time in the House this afternoon. Of course they pretended they knew nothing about it, but there are one or two of them there hand in glove with the Anarchist Party, get all their ideas red hot from Russia."

"Is there an Anarchist Party in London?" Miss Brown enquired.

"I should say there was," was the confident reply. "They say that they have over thirty branches in London and Glasgow alone, and they are only waiting for this universal strike which the Communists are threatening, and they'll do their bit all right. England's going to be a nice country presently, I don't think."

"Why don't the police prosecute or deport these Anarchists?" Frances asked. "They must know about them."

"They daren't," Maurice explained. "It's the finicky crowd at the Home Office that's stopped the police from doing their duty. England's supposed to be the one country where every man's free to express his political opinions, and the politicians are all crazy with that idea. I don't call Anarchists' opinions political opinions at all. Why, I heard a speech in Hyde Park last Sunday — a speech by a man with a woman by his side holding a Red Flag over him — and I say he ought to have been shot on the spot."

"You're not a Communist then?" Miss Brown murmured.

The man turned and smiled at her in a pitying fashion.

"What sane man in my position would be, madam?" he demanded. "Communism means, I suppose, an equal distribution of wealth. Wouldn't do a bit of good to any of us. It isn't only having money; it's knowing how to keep it. In less than half a generation we should be back again exactly where we were, only worse off. The man of moderate means is no use to us in the luxury professions. We want the capitalist with money to spend, who spends it. I'd make short work of those Communists if I had anything to do with them."

"What about the mines?" Miss Brown continued, with growing interest. "Don't you think that the miners have a right to a share in them?"

"No more than I think that one of my fellow boarders has a right to my Sunday pair of trousers," was the prompt reply. "Possession's one of the laws of the world. You can't disturb it without compensation, and not with compensation, unless with the consent of the owners. We're not a nation of robbers and we don't want to become one. What a man has nowadays he's worked for, or if he hasn't, his father or grandfather have for him. I don't believe in letting all the crazy Weary Willies of the world come round and demand an even share. You mark my words, young ladies — nothing will come of all this communistic talk. Even if they bring off this universal strike, it won't do what they think it will. I went to a meeting the other night," he went on confidentially. "There was a young man, Mr. Eric Greatson, who spoke, secretary to the Chairman of the Communists in London — believe he's an M. P. himself. Never heard such nonsense in my life. It was all kind of poetry stuff and imagining things — not a word that was a bit of good to a working man."

The two girls exchanged quiet glances.

"Mr. Eric Greatson is supposed to be a very clever man," Miss Brown observed.

"He may be clever in his own way," the coiffeur acknowledged, "which may be in writing verses for those to enjoy who understand them, or it may be in writing novels which he's quite right to call romances because there isn't a word of truth in them, but as for any sort of help to the ordinary working man, there wasn't anything of that sort tumbling out of Mr. Greatson's mouth."

He stood back and surveyed his handiwork. Frances made a little grimace at herself in the glass. It was an intelligent, almost a beautiful face, notwithstanding the slightly discontented curve of the mouth.

"You've made me look a shade less ugly," she admitted.

"I've made you look in the fashion, madam," was the self-satisfied reply. "And that's what you send for me for. I wish your friend would spare me ten minutes. I'd cut her hair so that her best friends wouldn't know her."

Miss Brown shook her head.

"You couldn't make me look fashionable."

"Not worth while trying either," Frances declared. "We girls all look like a flock of sheep nowadays."

The coiffeur, who was secretly of the same opinion, packed up and took his leave. The two girls completed their *toilettes* in leisurely fashion, and in due course started off on their expedition.

"What a funny world it would be," Miss Brown remarked abruptly, as they entered their taxi in Curzon Street, "if these Communists really had their way and the whole of the social conditions were changed. Why, all these big houses would have to come down, or be made into apartment houses, and the shops — there would be no one left to buy the very expensive things. Every one would want medium sized houses, medium priced jewellery, medium everything. The luxuries would all go begging."

"I think if Mr. Frankland is there we'll get him to talk about it to-night," Frances suggested. "I'd rather hear him talk than dance with him — especially if he's been drinking a great deal."

"I wish you wouldn't dance with him at all," Miss Brown begged earnestly. "I don't like him and though I know that you're not really in earnest I hate to see him with you. Why don't you dance with Mr. Paul? He thinks there's no one in the world like you, and his manners are charming."

"The long Russian," Frances murmured. "Well, he's very attractive, but what's the good of him? I'm passing through an era of common sense. I don't want to

waste my time or my thoughts or my affection upon any one who's absolutely hopeless."

"But is Mr. Paul absolutely hopeless?"

"Well, isn't he? A professional dancer by night, a whole family to support by working in a restaurant by day! Of course it's fine of him to do it. I admire him for it awfully — but I'm selfish, selfish, selfish."

They arrived presently at the Cosmopolitan, selected a suitable table, and ordered the dinner. Then they glanced around the room. Miss Brown, at any rate, was relieved to see no sign of Mr. Frankland.

"You seem terribly opulent," Frances observed, "but I am not going to allow you to pay to-night. The Princess has bought a dozen chickens from me — rather decent of her, I think, as you didn't seem to get on with her friend — and I've brought the money up with me."

"You'll have to keep it then," Miss Brown insisted. "This is a celebration party. I have accepted a permanent post. I'm secretary now to a Mr. John Glyde, and at a big salary too. He gave me a ridiculous sum of money not long ago for doing some work and he won't let me return any of it."

"We'll drink to him, whoever he may be," Frances declared, after the cocktails were brought. "You're a quiet little cat, Edith. You don't seem to feel the need of confidences like other girls. Then, all of a sudden, you come out with an astounding fact like this. Who is Mr. John Glyde, what sort of work does he do, and how old is he?"

"He is rather a fierce person," Miss Brown confided. "He is head of a new department at the Home Office. Middle-aged, I should think, and sometimes a little — impetuous."

"Of an affectionate disposition?"

"Good heavens, no. I think he means to be kind but

he's engrossed in his work, and I should think almost a woman hater."

"Sounds most attractive," Frances sighed. "I know I should like him better than chickens."

Presently Paul made his appearance. He came over at once to their table.

"You are all right?" he asked Miss Brown, a little anxiously.

"Quite," she assured him.

"Why shouldn't she be?" Frances exclaimed. "And why don't you ask after my health while you're about it?"

"I came to ask if you would dance with me?" he said, turning towards her almost shyly. "I know it's very soon — you're only starting dinner, are you? — but I have so many clients coming later to-night with whom I have to dance professionally."

Frances accepted willingly. The music was at its best and they danced for some time before they returned to the table.

"That was delightful, Mr. Paul," Frances acknowledged, with a sigh of pleasure. "Sit down with us for a moment now, won't you?"

"I should like to very much," he answered, "if you are sure that you will not let me interfere with your dinner. It is too bad of me to keep Miss Austin so long," he apologised, with a courteous bow to Miss Brown, "but I have so much dancing that is troublesome, and with the little practice she has, Miss Austin is really wonderful."

"How is the restaurant going?" Miss Brown enquired.

"Moderately well. We are just paying our way, I think. Anyhow the family all live free, and we have managed to keep out of debt, which is something. It is difficult though. We try to keep the clientèle amongst ourselves, but there really are not enough Russians in London with money of their own. Every now and then

we get some of the others. Those we will not serve. You observed, perhaps, to-night that when I first came up to you I was much upset? "

Miss Brown assented.

" I thought that you did not seem quite yourself," she admitted.

" I have been telling Miss Austin about it. Who should present himself, sit down at a table and prepare to dine, but Bretskopf, — Bretskopf, Miss Brown, the man who condemned relatives of mine to death for no other reason in the world except that they had property, that they were not of the people. Why, when he is in Russia, he lives at this moment in a house belonging to my uncle, into which he merely walked and of which he took possession. He is one of the vilest of his order, the most brutal of the revolutionists."

" What is he doing over here? " Miss Brown asked.

" That the English Government should have admitted him passes belief! " the young man exclaimed, with a note of passion in his tone. " He is here to confer with the leaders of the Communist Party, to aid them in their attempt to suborn the Trades Union leaders, to show them how to start a revolution — and he is allowed! Your police must know. They turn their heads the other way. Is it that they are afraid? Such things make one's blood boil. In this country you do indeed ask for the trouble which threatens."

A message was brought across to Paul, and he rose to his feet with a regretful sigh. A few minutes later he was dancing with a fluffy-looking dowager of very uncertain age, his head bent whilst he listened with grave politeness to her babble of conversation. Frances sighed.

" I am sorry for Mr. Paul," she reflected, her eyes following him around the room.

Later on in the evening at a time when their coming at

all had seemed improbable, Frankland and Eric Greatson presented themselves. Both seemed a little tired, Frankland, for him, almost morose. They came across the room and shook hands with the two girls.

"Hard work to get away to-night," Mr. Frankland observed. "It looked as though there were going to be a division up till ten o'clock. I see you young ladies have nearly finished dinner."

"Very nearly," Frances replied. "You had better come and talk to us later. Miss Brown and I want a little information about your party."

"I'll give you all the information you want," Frankland promised, with a touch of his usual pomposity. "I'm the right person to come to for that. We sha'n't be long feeding — had lunch late. Wish you'd let us send you young ladies a bottle of wine?"

"Certainly not," Miss Brown declined hastily. "You had better go and start your dinner. Your waiter is looking agitated."

The two men departed, Frankland with the somewhat unsteady gait of the man who has drunk a great many *apéritifs*. Their table was already flanked by a bottle of champagne in an ice pail, to which Frankland pointed impatiently even before they had sat down. His hair was untidier even than usual, his cheeks more flushed. His shirt had crept out from one side of his waistcoat and his voice travelled raucously across the room. Frances looked at him critically and her eyes wandered off to where Paul was still in melancholy attendance upon his dowager. Miss Brown watched, but in her great wisdom she made no remark.

CHAPTER XIX

Nevertheless, later in the evening, when it became evident that Frankland was hastening over his dinner in order to join them, Miss Brown ventured upon speech.

"I don't see why we encourage those two men," she remarked, as the two girls loitered over their coffee. "I don't dislike Mr. Greatson. He seems very intelligent. Your friend Mr. Frankland I am beginning to detest."

Frances shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't quite know what the attraction is myself," she confessed, "and yet I suppose I do. I am in what the modern novelists call a reactionary state. I like playing with fire even though it isn't fire."

Miss Brown's face duly expressed her disapproval.

"Nothing that you could say, Frances, would make me believe that Mr. Frankland could possibly be 'fire' to you."

"Precisely, my dear, but don't you see that I am obviously 'fire' to Mr. Frankland. It is a poor sort of one-sided emotion," Frances continued, tapping a fresh cigarette on the table, "but there it is, you see. It yields me a faint amusement to read what the man has in his mind when he invites me to various expeditions. He thinks he is so clever, and he is really so terribly clumsy. I wish he were attractive. I honestly believe that the only scruples I have left are scruples of taste."

Miss Brown moved in her chair uncomfortably.

"There are certain moods, Frances," she confided coldly, "in which you say things which are unpleasant to listen to and unjust to yourself."

"Little prig!" Frances murmured. "Some day or

other though, when you poke that dear little nose of yours further out into the world and feel the years slipping by, even you may look at things differently. Men are really all pretty well alike, only the Frankland type are too clumsy to conceal what they want. Here they come! Mr. Frankland has drunk most of that bottle of wine, and I feel convinced that to-night he is going to be enterprising."

The two men had risen to their feet and were crossing the room, Frankland lumbering and pompous, yet with a certain air of brute power about him which relieved his otherwise commonplace appearance. By his side, Greatson seemed almost anæmic.

"Mr. Frankland," Frances began at once, as the waiter brought chairs, and the new arrivals ordered coffee and liqueurs for the party, "Miss Brown and I are in a serious frame of mind to-night. I think this terrible affair in South Audley Street has brought it on. We know that you two belong to the advanced Labour Party — what is it you call yourselves — Communists? We want to know what communism is?"

"Communism," Eric Greatson began eagerly ——

Frances stopped him.

"Just one moment," she begged. "Remember that we are both very ignorant young people. We want a single sentence of explanation — not a lecture."

"Communism," Greatson pronounced thoughtfully, "is a political belief or creed which demands, however it may be brought about, a revolutionary change in social conditions which shall place each man in a position to enjoy what his neighbour enjoys."

"Not bad that," Frankland condescended — "couldn't have put it better myself."

"It seems to me," Miss Brown commented, "that would mean a redistribution of money and property."

"Naturally," Frankland assented. "We demand na-

tionalisation of all industries with a fair allotment of remuneration to the working parts of the machine, the total abolishment of the capitalist and wage system, and the conduct of all private businesses by a committee of the workmen."

Miss Brown was genuinely interested. Notwithstanding her dislike for Frankland, she had the best reasons for knowing that he was considered an authority on his own forms of political belief, and it seemed to her that this was a wonderful opportunity for solving some of the problems which had been perplexing her.

"Forgive my asking questions, please," she begged, "but I do so want to understand. Supposing there are a thousand operatives at a factory to-day, some of whom have been sober and industrious and saved money, and others, for various reasons, such as horse racing or drinking or laziness, who haven't saved a penny. Wouldn't the same thing continue under your system, and wouldn't that start capitalism again?"

"Quite a reasonable criticism, Miss Brown," Eric Greatson intervened, "but to a certain extent the real Communist is a Christian Scientist. The weakness which induces a man to seek evil in life instead of good, to waste his money instead of living like his fellows, is a malady not a predisposition. It could be cured in time. It would disappear entirely before the next generation. It would be fought against according to means of our own, and after fifty years of a communist régime administered according to the highest ideals — which have never yet been administered in any state — all forms of vice would gradually become negligible. In the end they would disappear altogether and the world would become morally a much better place. The hopelessly vicious — a very small minority, believe me — would automatically be eliminated."

"And now tell me this, please," Miss Brown continued. "How is the change from the present system of government to communism to be brought about?"

"The same way as in France and Russia, and to a lesser extent in Germany," Frankland interposed, with the air of a man who has been silent too long — "a revolution. We Communists are not hypocrites, whatever we may be. I've said a dozen times within the last few weeks upon a public platform that what the world wants is a revolution. Ten years ago they'd have put me in prison for it. To-day no one dares touch us."

"I don't think I like the idea of a revolution in England," Frances observed.

"A bloodless one, if we could have our way," Greatson remarked.

"Or as bloody as you like, if we couldn't," Frankland put in pugnaciously.

"Would you fight, Mr. Frankland?" Frances enquired, with a little smile at the corners of her lips.

"I'm a leader," was the brusque reply. "Also an administrator. I'd fight if it came my way, but I don't suppose I should be allowed to. We've a few hundred thousand trained men who are willing enough to do that."

"And the Army?" Miss Brown ventured.

Frankland scoffed.

"They're being dealt with," he declared. "Poor old Tommy Atkins is being told the truth for once in his life. We've taken that in hand all right, Miss Brown. When the time comes, if ever it should, that any part of the British Army stands face to face with honest revolutionaries, there won't be a shot fired. Englishmen are not fools in any walk of life. A soldier isn't likely to obey orders to destroy his own pals who are fighting his own cause. An Army isn't a machine any longer, and don't you forget it."

"Tell me, please," Miss Brown went on, "what is the difference between communism and anarchy?"

"Anarchy is senseless destruction of property and life," Eric Greatson explained, "indulged in simply as a form of terrorism, with which we have no sympathy."

Miss Brown turned and deliberately faced Eric Greatson.

"What about this terrible affair in South Audley Street this morning? You know something about that, don't you? They say that it was the work of an Anarchist."

There was a moment's silence. Frankland drank half the remainder of his brandy; neither of the men seemed anxious to speak of the South Audley Street affair.

"The Anarchists by themselves are a senseless crowd," Frankland pronounced. "As a side arm of communism they are sometimes useful. They have been made use of now and then by our party. We would make use of them again if necessary. They have to be kept under control though."

"In the case of a revolution," Miss Brown surmised, "you might find that difficult."

Mr. Frankland thrust his hands further down into his trousers pockets. His gold watch chain seemed to become more prominent; another inch of shirt front escaped from the restraint of his waistcoat.

"I suppose there'd be a bit of looting," he admitted. "A good many things would happen that would shock you young ladies, no doubt, but we should never lose control. Anarchy as a cause has no logical standing. It couldn't possibly form the basis of any government."

"It would in short be your discreditable ally," Miss Brown murmured.

"Lots of common sense about you, young lady," Mr. Frankland admitted. "I wish your friend had as much. I don't know what's the matter with her to-night.

Scarcely opens her mouth and keeps on edging her chair a little further away."

Frances laughed softly.

"I'm just the same as I've always been, Mr. Frankland," she assured him, "only sometimes you don't understand me."

"Come and dance then," he invited sulkily.

She laid down her cigarette and rose.

"I can't resist so gracious and pressing an invitation," she murmured.

Eric Greatson reached across the table for his hitherto untasted glass of brandy, and drew his chair nearer to his companion's.

"Miss Brown," he said, "you ask a great many questions. You lead us on to talk, but you say very little yourself. Yet in a way, you are a very mysterious person. I should like to know more about you and your life."

"Why?"

"Is that coquetry, or do you really wish to know why I am interested?"

"I really wish to know."

"May I tell you this then?" he begged, and Miss Brown, watching his sensitive face, realised that there was no doubt about his sincerity. "It isn't because you are — shall I say the executor — of the great enemy of our cause. It isn't for anything to do with that. My interest is in you personally."

"Are you married like Mr. Frankland?"

"I am not," was the emphatic reply, "and whilst we are upon the subject I should like to say that Frankland's moral standards are not mine."

"I am glad to hear that," Miss Brown confessed. "You imply that I am very secretive. I will give you a proof to the contrary. I will take you into my confidence. I don't like Mr. Frankland, and I wish that Frances would not

encourage him. I know that she only does it because she finds some foolish sort of amusement in it, but at the same time I think that it is unworthy of her. Mr. Frankland is not a nice man."

Greatson shrugged his shoulders.

"Don't think I'm a snob," he begged — "intellectually or in any other way — if I point out that Mr. Frankland has had no opportunity of understanding in the least what women of Miss Austin's stamp are like or how they should be treated. He was down in the mines at twelve years old, his father was a drunkard and his mother worse. He has picked up an immense store of general knowledge by sheer force of will and industry. He has developed the knack of seeing certain vital matters clearly enough from one point of view — his own — and speaking of them fluently, but as regards the more gracious side of life, he has never seen it and if he had he would not be able to appreciate it. A woman means only one thing with him. The greatest height to which he rises is that he has fancies. Sometimes he fancies one woman more than another. That's just as far as he reaches."

"Then don't you consider," Miss Brown demanded, "that it is unpardonable impertinence on his part to make the suggestions he does to a girl like Miss Austin?"

"It isn't exactly impertinence," he argued. "It's sheer lack of comprehension, as I told you before. All women are the same to Frankland, except that he fancies one more than another. He thinks that he is only offering your friend what any man has a right to offer any woman. And as his experience has been gained in a different circle of life he doesn't, I suppose, understand failure."

"I think," Miss Brown pronounced, "that he is a most abominable person. I believe that Frances has made up her mind not to encourage him any more. I am thankful for it."

Eric Greatson took off his spectacles and wiped them, with a little smile.

"I thought they weren't getting on very well to-night," he remarked. "Your friend had that rather superior, rather humorous smile all the time she was dancing, and Frankland was so furious he was bumping into every one. They are sitting down in the lounge now and Frankland is looking as he does when he's been successfully heckled at a political meeting. And before they come back may I remind you, Miss Brown, that as yet we have scarcely said a word about yourself. Your friend is a very charming young lady, and social politics are one of the most interesting things in life, but I should like, if I might, to talk a little about Miss Brown."

She smiled at him, pleasantly enough, but always with that air of aloofness which seemed part of her natural reserve.

"I will become very personal indeed," she said, dropping her voice a little and glancing around cautiously. "Mr. Greatson, it is a very terrible thought for me that you could have had the slightest knowledge of what was likely to happen in South Audley Street this morning, but so long as you did know, I do appreciate your coming to see me. You must have run a very considerable risk by doing so, and I suppose your enterprise, although I hated you for it at the time, saved my life."

Greatson was obviously ill at ease.

"I don't feel that I deserve any thanks, Miss Brown," he assured her. "The whole move was utterly against my principles, although I admit the logic of the arguments on the other side. I am not on the Action Committee of my party, and the matter never came before my Chief. I got to know about it entirely by accident, and I don't mind admitting that I did not go to bed at all last night, trying to make up my mind what to do."

"You did a very kindly thing," she acknowledged, "and believe me I am grateful."

"I am not going to ask you any more personal questions, Miss Brown," he promised. "I realise that you and I, in opposite camps, occupy very difficult positions, but I want you to let me, if you will, have the opportunity of seeing a little more of you occasionally."

She shook her head.

"I don't think, Mr. Greatson," she said, "that it would be wise."

"I should never refer to your work," he went on eagerly, "whatever it may be. I am not a spy. I just want you to give me, if you will, a little of your friendship. I should like to see more of you if I might, in a different sort of environment. I don't care much about this sort of thing. I don't think you do really. You come here for your friend's sake. We might go down into the country some day, and I should like you to meet some of my friends with whom I think you would get on well — not the Frankland type at all."

"All that is very difficult, Mr. Greatson," Miss Brown regretted — "just now, at any rate. A week or two ago it would have all been different. Now — well, there is no reason why we shouldn't talk plainly, is there? Chance placed in my keeping the results of the labours of the man who hated your party and who worked against it to the death. Those secrets are still, I take it, to be preserved."

"I see your point, Miss Brown," Greatson interrupted eagerly, "but ——"

He stopped short. Frankland was standing by the table, flushed and truculent. Frances was calmly gathering up the trifles she had left in her place.

"Miss Austin and I are going on to the 'Night Hawk'," he announced. "You needn't worry, Miss

Brown. I'll bring the young lady home even if we are a bit late."

Frances had picked up her possessions. There was a sweet but dangerous smile upon her lips.

"Miss Austin is doing nothing of the sort," she said, with a glance of reassurance at Miss Brown.

"You said you'd think about it," Frankland declared.

"I have thought about it, and I have decided not to go. Come along, Edith."

Frankland made an effort to smother his anger. He turned to Miss Brown.

"I say, won't you persuade her, Miss Brown?" he begged. "You and Greatson can come along too."

"I'm sorry," the latter intervened, "but I don't think either Miss Brown or Miss Austin would like the 'Night Hawk' at all. It isn't a place I'd take my sister to, for instance, and she's not too strict. Better call that off. If you want to go on anywhere else ——"

"Thank you so much, Mr. Greatson," Frances interrupted. "Come along, Edith."

"What the devil do you mean by interfering?" Frankland demanded.

Greatson faced him across the table.

"I interfered," he said, "simply because you know as well as I do that the 'Night Hawk' is the most disreputable place in London, and if you'll allow me to say so, Frankland, you ought to have known better than to have suggested taking either of these young women there."

Frankland looked around. Frances and Miss Brown had already disappeared. For a moment he glared across at Greatson, who was standing very calm and self-possessed, preparing to light a cigarette. Then he dumped himself down in his chair.

"Oh damn it all!" he exclaimed. "Let 'em go to hell! We'll stop here and have another drink."

CHAPTER XX

Frances, half an hour later, her evening gown thrown carelessly over a chair, lay flat upon her bed, the rest of her costume entirely negligible. She was smoking a cigarette, her hands clasped behind her head, watching Miss Brown who was boiling a kettle.

"Absurd idea of mine to want tea," she murmured.

"I often have tea myself before I go to bed," Miss Brown confided.

"We old maids need something," Frances sighed, "and, alas, I have begun to feel that I am going to be an old maid. Seems a pity."

Miss Brown knew better than to ask questions. She maintained an attitude of sympathetic enquiry.

"I let him take me into the darkest corner of the lounge on purpose," Frances continued. "I was pretty well disgusted with him before, but I thought — I wanted to feel what it would really be like to be kissed by him."

"You let him kiss you!" Miss Brown asked severely.

"I meant to," Frances confessed. "In the end he was so horrid about it that I escaped with just a touch on the corner of my cheek. Do you like being kissed on the lips, Edith?"

Miss Brown turned around.

"No man has ever kissed me on the lips in my life," she declared.

Frances looked at her for a moment and nodded.

"Well, I might have guessed it," she said. "You are telling the truth, too, which makes it more awful. Well, no man has kissed me for a long time, and I know one thing for certain now — Mr. Frankland never will."

"How you could have conceived the possibility," Miss Brown began sternly ——

"Oh shut up, you little fool!" Frances interrupted. "You're made differently. You don't understand. There's only half of me alive like this, and the other half is turning me around and twisting me about inside. I'd escape all right if I could, but I know now that it can't be through Mr. Frankland."

"I should hope not!" Miss Brown exclaimed emphatically. "Of the two men, why on earth don't you take a little notice of Mr. Greatson? Even if he doesn't dance, he's most interesting to talk to."

"You seem to choose such serious types," Frances observed, with a grimace. "When a young man as serious as Mr. Greatson starts to make love to me he appeals to my sense of humour more than my affections, and the whole thing seems so ridiculous. Funny creatures we are, aren't we, Edith?"

Miss Brown brought her friend a cup of tea, made one for herself, slipped off her own gown in decorous fashion and wrapped herself in a dressing gown. Thus attired she sat in an easy-chair in front of the stove.

"Yes, I suppose we are funny, Frances," she reflected — "you especially. I wouldn't call you clever — I don't know whether you are or not — but you have too sensitive a brain for the everyday things of life. Directly anything simple or interesting presents itself, you either laugh at it or despise it."

"What about Mr. Frankland then?" Frances demanded. "He's as simple as an idiot — apart from his work, that is. There's only one way he could possibly appeal to any one — the lowest. And he did appeal to me for a time. I wondered all sorts of things. I liked his look of strength — even the smell of cigars about him. I didn't dislike his dissipated eyes. He was forceful and irritable

and used to getting what he wanted, and like a child in letting you know what he wanted. It was only one side of me he appealed to, and that was the rottenest. He has gone now, so I can think of him dispassionately, but if he'd known how to lower his voice just a little now and then, given the least sign of any real sentiment, if he'd lost for a moment his cocksure, bullying manner — well, I don't know. He might, as some idiot of a novelist said, have just caught the tide of opportunity. He didn't anyway. He isn't capable of it, and I never want to see him again as long as I live. He's behaved like the worst kind of beast. When he found he couldn't have his own way and was never likely to, he just abused me. What fools they are, these men, Edith! They could get so much more of what they want in this world if they'd only take the trouble to learn how."

Miss Brown's face under the shaded light was absolutely unsympathetic, almost severe.

"My dear Frances," she said, "I don't think that life with the chickens is agreeing with you."

"Well, I've got to go on with it," was the somewhat despondent reply. "Every bob I have is sunk in those rotten little huts and all the machinery for making them pay. It's you who have all the luck, Edith. You've got a job you're crazy about, you've somehow or other become a romantic figure in some sort of an intrigue, and you've got a young man who, whenever he's near, can't keep his eyes off you. What's your new employer like?"

"I told you before," Miss Brown replied. "He is rather elderly and devoted to his profession. I am just the sort of secretary to suit him — the mechanical instrument keeping a record of all the things he needs recorded."

"Yes," Frances reflected, stretching herself out. "I suppose you have in you the makings of a perfect secretary. Temperament — if any — perfectly under control.

Affections — yes, you probably have affections — entirely self-supporting. Does any one ever kiss you at all, Edith? "

"No one. And I do wish you'd leave off this habit of talk, Frances."

"Must talk according to my moods, child. I've been in this sort of mood for a month now. I think when I get back to the country, though, I shall stay there. London to me always means amazing anticipation and crushing disappointment. I shall take up a hobby. Isn't a hobby the first sign of accepted spinsterhood — sketching or fine needlework or something like that? I shall probably ——"

"Listen!" Miss Brown interrupted, sitting upright with a start.

It was past two o'clock and the little street had been deserted ever since the closing time of the public house at the corner. The silence outside, however, was suddenly almost fearsomely broken. From somewhere in the direction of Curzon Street came a confused clamour of voices, — voices shrill and yet raucous, voices which somehow or other reminded the two girls, listening now side by side at the window, of a pack of wild animals in full cry — and in the nearer distance, along the pavement, closer at every moment, came the stumbling footsteps of a man running. Miss Brown shivered. She had a momentary accession of weakness. Surely the tragedy of the morning had been sufficient.

"Put out the light, Frances," she whispered.

Frances shook her head. What impulse possessed her she never knew, then or at any future time. She touched the spring which released the blind and stood at the window, and almost as she did so, the tall form came stumbling by, paused at the unexpected flash of light which streamed out across the pavement, and stared in. Miss Brown's little cry was half of terror, half of frank amaze-

ment. It was Paul who stood there, supporting himself with his left hand against the wall, his dinner coat buttoned up to the throat, one side of his face covered with blood, hatless, and with a glare in his eyes almost of savagery. He stood swaying a little on his feet, speechless. The clamour of voices behind seemed to grow nearer. His pursuers, whoever they might be, were evidently turning into the alley. Miss Brown tapped at the window and threw it open a few inches.

"Wait a moment," she called out. "I shall let you in."

"Please not," he cried. "They are all desperate. I am off!"

Frances was out of the room in a flash. She unfastened the latch and opened the green painted front door. Paul was already on his way down the street. She summoned him imperiously.

"Come back, Mr. Paul — at once!"

He hesitated. The footsteps of his unseen pursuers were drawing nearer.

"Don't be an idiot!" Frances insisted, stamping her foot. "Quickly! Quickly, or I shall come out and fetch you!"

"I didn't mean," he began, turning around — "I had no idea ——"

She caught him by the coat and dragged him in just as two or three men appeared through the opening of the entry. In a moment she had the door closed and chained. She looked at him in horror as she half pushed, half supported him into the room.

"Heavens, what has happened to you?" she exclaimed.

He staggered into a chair and drew one or two long breaths. Frances, who had been a nurse during the war, saw that he was on the point of fainting. She held her cup of hot tea to his lips.

"I ought not," he faltered ——

Then he broke off and said something in Russian. The footsteps came to a pause outside. There was a confused murmur of voices. Miss Brown, who had already fastened the window, turned out the lights. The electric bell pealed through the silence of the house, followed by a clamorous knocking at the door. Frances, who was bending over Paul, looked up enquiringly.

"There's no one else in the house," Miss Brown whispered. "Mrs. Morton went down to Brighton to-day for the week-end, and the two men who share the rooms above went away this afternoon for three days."

"What are you going to do?" Frances asked.

Miss Brown opened the drawer of her little dressing table and took out her revolver with its five chambers still loaded. Then she considered for a moment.

"If I open the door," she said, "they'll rush in. If I open this window they'll do the same thing. If we ring up the police we may find it's Mr. Paul we're getting into trouble."

Again the bell pealed and the front door shook upon its hinges with a knocking more insistent than ever.

"If I stamp on the floor, ring up Marlborough Street Police Station," Miss Brown enjoined.

She stole out of the room, ran lightly up the stairs, entered the vacant apartment above and threw open the window. Below, five men were standing. She saw them only indistinctly in the light from the distant street lamp, but they obviously had no kinship with the ordinary order of midnight marauders. Three of them were in evening dress, and one of them, whose finger was still pressing the bell, seemed to her, with his pointed black beard and sallow complexion, vaguely familiar. He was wearing a silk hat and long coat with an astrakan collar turned up. At the sound of the opening of the window he raised his

head, and Miss Brown immediately recognised him. It was Malakoff.

"What do you want?" Miss Brown demanded.

"I want the man whom you let into this house just now," was the prompt reply.

"Why?"

There was a confused murmur of voices. The faces of all five men were upturned, and Miss Brown was thankful for the obscurity in which she stood.

"He's murdered a man in Clarges Street," Malakoff declared.

"You're not the police," Miss Brown rejoined.

One of the men, who was swinging a short, heavy stick, pushed his way into the middle of the pavement.

"Look here," he called out, "the police can deal with this later on. We want that man and we're going to have him. We're coming through your window down here if you don't open the door."

Miss Brown leaned a little further out into the night and they saw what she was holding in her right hand. They all scrambled back into the roadway.

"The first one who comes near the window," she warned them, "I shall shoot, whoever it is. My friend below is ringing up Marlborough Street, at the present moment. If you say the man below is a murderer, the police can have him. It seems to me from the state he's in that it's you they'll want."

There was a momentary silence. Then they all began to talk to one another, and though not a single word they spoke was intelligible to Miss Brown, she was conscious of an atmosphere of blasphemy. They drew gradually further away, and lights began to flash out from the houses opposite. As soon as they had turned the corner, Miss Brown descended the stairs to find Paul, now fully conscious, sitting up with his back to the wall.

"They've gone," she announced.

It was significant of her that she asked for no explanation. Paul, however, promptly provided it.

"I am very sorry indeed," he began — "awfully sorry. You see, I went home from the Cosmopolitan with some friends — Russians who live near here. I stayed with them all the time and then when I left them, just near, the door of a house opened, and out came Bretskopf, the man I spoke to you about, the Russian who has been the evil genius of my family. It was a house — I do not know your name in English — a bad house. I had warned Bretskopf that if he stayed twenty-four hours in England he risked his life. I met him face to face. He had been drinking. He was wearing — actually wearing — as he stepped out on to the pavement, the black pearls he stole from my grandmother's house, and as I saw him there — I remembered the rest. I took him by the collar. I had a Malacca cane and I beat him. I beat him everywhere. They came rushing out from the house — his friends. Two or three of them tried to rescue him. They couldn't. He was mine. When I had finished with him, I threw him into the gutter. Then they all came for me, and one of them hit me from behind. There were others streaming out of the house — six or seven of them — they'd been having a debauch there, I suppose — so I ran. I didn't mean to come to you. I never thought of it at all. I turned down the entry to put them off the scent, and then I passed your window."

Miss Brown, very practical, was thinking hard.

"Do you think you killed him?" she asked.

"No," Paul answered. "I am afraid not. Two of them carried him back into the house. He was groaning, but he was alive. No, I did not kill him. I broke his arm, I think, and perhaps his leg, but I do not think that he is dead. I had not time."

He began to mumble incoherently. Frances fetched water and towels, and together the two girls bound up his wounds. He had fallen into a semi-comatose state, half asleep and half unconscious.

"Perhaps you'll tell me now," Frances demanded, when they had placed a pillow under his head, "exactly what you are going to do about this young man?"

"We are going to sleep in our dressing gowns," Miss Brown suggested, "and he can stay where he is. There is nothing else for it. We can't turn him out into the streets."

"I should think not indeed! I wonder if he's quite comfortable."

Frances rested her hand gently upon his forehead, adjusted a bandage, and moved the pillow a little. Reassured by his regular breathing, she presently slipped off the remainder of her clothes and wrapped herself in her dressing gown, an example which Miss Brown, after a moment's hesitation and with more circumspection, followed. Once more they turned out the light. Paul, stretched at full length, seemed huge, almost colossal, in the gloom of the room.

CHAPTER XXI

Miss Brown opened her eyes in broad daylight and lay quite still for several seconds struggling with a confused haze of recollection. Suddenly she remembered everything and pulled the somewhat disordered bedclothes up to her chin. Furtively she turned her head towards the hearth-rug. The pillow was still in its place but there was no sign of Paul. Frances, with her long arms thrown wide on either side, was sleeping peacefully. Miss Brown sat up in bed, and looked timidly round the room. Pinned to the corner of her pillow was a roughly scrawled pencilled note, which she hastily read:

I am so sorry. I am quite well and I have gone. I hope I shall not wake either of you. You probably saved my life. How shall I speak of my gratitude?

Paul.

Miss Brown swung herself out of bed, started the geyser going in the little apartment at the end of the corridor, filled the kettle and lit the stove. Then she selected her clothes for the morning. Presently Frances opened her eyes lazily and looked around her.

"Where's our escort?" she demanded.

"Stolen away," Miss Brown replied. "Left a note — a P. P. C. pinned to my pillow. There it is on the table."

Frances sat up and clasped her knees.

"Pinned to *your* pillow!" she exclaimed. "As a prude of the first water, Miss Brown, I should think that the memory of last night, or rather this morning, will haunt you to your dying day."

"It didn't keep me awake, at any rate," was the equable reply. "Do you mind if I have my bath first? I have to be down in Whitehall at half-past nine."

Frances yawned.

"I sha'n't go down until the ten-forty," she announced. "You seem to treat last night's little affair very lightly, Edith. Is that sort of thing happening to you all the time? If so, I'm a permanency here, even if you have to feed me. I like the stir of it."

Miss Brown vouchsafed no reply. She took her bath, dressed with her usual simplicity but with the same scrupulous care as to detail, slipped out and bought some rolls from the baker's shop, a pat of butter from the grocer's next door and a morning paper, which she scrutinised closely over her breakfast. There were still columns about the South Audley Street outrage, and an announcement of the fact that the police were in possession of the premises from which the bombs had been traced, and had seized sufficient explosives to blow up half London. As regarded any possible arrests, the police were uncommunicative, but great unsettlement was reported to exist in certain suspected quarters. She searched through the remainder of the paper feverishly, but found not the slightest mention of any untoward happening in Clarges Street or their immediate neighbourhood. At nine o'clock, whilst Frances was still sleeping, Miss Brown put on her hat and brown mackintosh — it was raining heavily — and departed for Whitehall. She arrived at five minutes before her appointed hour but found Dessiter already awaiting her.

"Take off your hat quickly, please, Miss Brown," he enjoined. "Sit down there. I want to talk to you. No, leave the letters alone until after I have finished."

Miss Brown obeyed meekly.

"I asked you," he went on, "yesterday whether you would accept a position here as my secretary. You ac-

cepted. I have been thinking it over. I want to ask you now whether you will consent to be something more than my secretary."

Miss Brown's eyes had never been bluer than at that moment. She gripped the sides of her chair. She felt her heart almost stop beating, and then pound away until she became actually breathless. He was looking at her intently, but without the slightest softening in the hard lines about his face.

" A secretary," he explained, " is neither one thing nor the other. You know now more than any one else outside this building what my life is like, and the nature of my work. There are times when I need help. I want to explain to you, if you will listen carefully, why I think it worth while to devote my life to my job, and I want to ask you whether you are willing to take your share now and then of the risks, to be something more than a mere typing secretary, to be actually one of my organisation? What you would in fact become is a secret service agent of the X. Y. O. Department of the Home Office, with an affiliation across the way at Scotland Yard."

Miss Brown swayed a little in her chair. She felt an insane desire to laugh. What a fool she had been. Try as she would she found speech impossible. Dessiter, however, continued.

" I want you to feel in your own mind that the work's worth while," he said impressively. " Patriotism's rather at a discount since the war. Every one worked themselves up into a fever then, and nowadays there's a perfectly natural reaction to the whole thing. Still this is our country and our constitution, and so far as I'm concerned I'd sooner Germany had licked us and that we were paying tribute to the Germans than see this country handed over to a gang of communists and anarchists, and God knows what, whose sole idea is to Russianise us, stamp out all

our old institutions and blot us out of history for all time. What do you say to that, Miss Brown?"

"I agree with you entirely."

"These fellows who are making all the upset couldn't govern a country if they had it to govern. I'm an advanced thinker myself. I was glad when a Socialist Government got in. I knew what would happen. The intellectuals took command at once; the ranters and tub-thumpers fell behind. The Socialists governed the country very much as their predecessors had done because it was the only way it could be governed. They were clever men and they realised that. Naturally that only exasperated the fanatics, the extremists of their own party, and these men from that moment set themselves steadfastly to work with secret societies, foreign money, Russian help, to corrupt so far as they could the Trades Unions, the railways, the Army and the Navy. Internationalisation is of course what they're aiming at, but they're starting with England because we're the worst governed of the European countries, and therefore there's more discontent amongst the people for them to work upon. We fought them openly for some time — the country has — and now we're imitating their own tactics — we're fighting them underground as well. I've got the Home Office to listen to me: hence this department of mine with a staff of over two hundred, not more than half a dozen of whom you will probably ever see. I'm in it up to the neck, and I've got a great pull. The bluff of my death has been entirely successful. They were afraid of Dessiter. They don't care a damn about John Glyde. Now, are you going to work with me, Miss Brown, body and soul? Listen before you answer. You will draw your three hundred a year and there will be grants, liberal allowances, a pension afterwards, even if we are disbanded in six months, but there'll never be any honours, mind. You'll never be made

a Dame of the Empire, even if you save the country. No one will ever have heard of your name, or know what your work is."

She smiled.

"As though I should care about such things," she said. "Besides, don't I know? I looked everywhere for your obituary notices."

"A proof of our power over the press," he remarked. "The Home Office is still a little difficult but nothing like what it used to be, and Scotland Yard has an entirely new code."

"Do you think," Miss Brown ventured, "that there will ever be serious trouble?"

Dessiter shrugged his shoulders.

"Five years ago," he said, "if the Secretary of the Miners' Federation had got up and declared that he was working for a revolution, as that fellow Frankland did last week, he would have been in jail before nightfall. To-day they're all preaching it openly, even discussing their plans for feeding the people and letting the others starve. I tell you frankly, I don't know, Miss Brown. Our greatest danger is the undoubted fact, as I said just now, that we're the worst governed country in the world. The people are taxed almost out of existence, out of all enjoyment of life, and huge sums of money are wasted on extravagant schemes and fanciful organisations. Every industry in the country is suffering for the same reason — overtaxation. That's where our danger lies — in the fact that we haven't a single statesman worthy of the name, and that there are so many genuine causes for discontent. I think that a tremendous unheaval may very likely come, a state of chaos may ensue in the country and the leaders of the people may take control, but as to actual fighting, I can't see it. You need class hatred for that, and we haven't any to speak of. Our *bourgeoisie*

are still too near our working classes, and our aristocracy has been taxed out of being. I don't see a bloody revolution, but a revolution of some sort is what we're out to fight against. Are you with me, Miss Brown?"

She was her usual composed self now. She looked up at him and smiled.

"Absolutely," she assured him. "I'll do all I can. I'm not very clever but I can be trusted."

He came and sat upon the edge of her table. His fingers were playing with his cigarette case. In the momentary pause she found herself studying him. He was wearing country clothes of grey tweed, inclined to be shabby but well cut and becoming to his long, lithe figure. The lines of his face seemed to her to have become a little deeper even during the last few days but his eyes were bright, and there was a certain indefinable vigour, mental as well as physical, which seemed to radiate from him.

"Miss Brown," he said, "I never flatter. You have the gifts I need. You have no nerves, in your quiet way you are shrewd, you are not easily led away from a course of action upon which you have decided, and there is a great deal of force behind that sedate life of yours. I know. I'm a judge of men and women. I've had to be, for there are times you have to trust, times when a mistake would cost you your life. It's agreed then. We work together?"

"I shall be very proud," she assured him.

"Nominally, of course," he continued, walking up and down the room, "you are my typist, just as nominally I am one of the under-secretaries at the Home Office. Actually I am the chief of X. Y. O. and you will be my trusted helper as well as my secretary. Now let me explain your first job. It isn't pleasant, but there's no risk."

"Here in London?"

"No, down at Camberley. By the bye, you will have to catch the ten-forty-six train from Waterloo."

Miss Brown glanced at the clock.

"I must leave here in twenty minutes."

He nodded, and took up some papers from his desk.

"Here are your instructions. You will book to Camberley, take a cab and drive to this address, — 'Lady Hannerton, The Nook, Merton Road, Camberley.' Lady Hannerton has applied to the principal agency in the West End for a secretary. By arrangement with the manageress you are to offer yourself for the post. Here are your references," he added, handing her a little bundle of letters secured with a rubber band. "Unexceptionable, I think you will find them. Lady Hannerton is very fond of money, so we will make your selection a certainty by asking a very moderate salary — let us say two pounds a week. Live in the house if you can. Exactly opposite is a grocer's shop with a telephone. Make friends with the woman who runs it. You may have to use the telephone frequently. Take down these two numbers — one for me, 1000 Whitehall, which you can use at any time night or day, and, in case of emergency or certain other contingencies which I will explain to you, here is a local number — 100 Q Aldershot, — which will put you in touch with a staff officer who is acting for us."

"How long am I to stay with Lady Hannerton, and what is my work to be?" Miss Brown enquired.

"You may be there a week, perhaps a fortnight," Dessiter announced. "If you have exceptional good luck perhaps only three or four days. From the moment of your arrival I want the names of every one who visits the house, both officially and for any other purpose."

"Is it Lady Hannerton who is the suspect?" Miss Brown enquired.

"It is. Suspect is the word. What we need is definite

information. By some means or other, an enormous quantity of literature of the worst type is being distributed amongst the soldiers, in Aldershot, Camberley and the whole of that district. A great deal of it is in the shape of placards stuck up on walls and trees during the night, but a large quantity of pamphlets get into the hands of the soldiers themselves, and we believe by means of their wives."

"Is Lady Hannerton an Englishwoman?"

"She is not only an Englishwoman of good family," Dessiter answered, "but she is the widow of a very distinguished general who was killed during the last week of the war. She herself spends half her time on the Continent where our reports tell us that she gambles very high. She has no money except her pension so that she has, without a doubt, means of supplementing her income. All these things we want to discover."

"May I suggest something?" Miss Brown ventured.

"Of course."

"You have powers which would enable you to examine Lady Hannerton's banking account. Couldn't you trace any sums that were paid in apart from her pension?"

Dessiter nodded approvingly.

"Quite right, Miss Brown," he said, "but you may be sure that we've tried that. There are very considerable sums paid in at odd times but these are all by cheque on an American bank over which we have no jurisdiction, and who refuses information regarding its clients. Even that has stopped lately, but we believe that Lady Hannerton has money paid to her account at a bank somewhere on the Riviera. There is one other person down there, Miss Brown, whom I want you to look out for — a man named Thornton."

"A friend of Lady Hannerton?"

"Not that we know of. Thornton is an openly declared

member of the Communist Party. He has been lecturing in Hyde Park for the last two years, but he is lying doggo just now. He is, as a matter of fact, rather one of the tragic figures on the other side. He was a magnificent soldier, did splendidly in the war, got a V. C. and every possible medal. When he came back he found his wife practically dying of starvation. He had a large family and she'd worked herself to death. His two elder sons were killed, and unfortunately their lives were rather thrown away by a foolish commander. Thornton ought to have been found a job of course, but he wasn't. He took to drink at odd times. No one seems to have looked after him, and then he got into the hands of these Communists. He was mixed up in a brawl and sent to prison notwithstanding his record. That finished him. To-day he's one of the most dangerous men on the other side. I had a talk to him once. He showed me the photograph of his dead wife and the account of his own conviction at Bow Street. He'd had it framed. He'll go on to the end now, and I'm afraid it will be a bad end."

Miss Brown glanced once more at the clock. Dessiter nodded.

"What you have to do," he summarised, "sounds simple enough, but you may find it not quite so easy as it seems. I want the names of every one who visits Lady Hannerton. I want to know particularly if Thornton is ever there. I want to fathom the nature of Lady Hannerton's activities amongst the soldiers' wives, and naturally I want you to discover, if you can, whether any of this infernal literature is distributed through her."

Miss Brown inclined her head gravely.

"I think I understand," she said.

"You will probably get the job all right," he said, "but if there's any trouble about it come straight back and report."

CHAPTER XXII

Miss Brown duly caught her train and was driven from Camberley station in a taxicab to the address given — a very modest villa on the edge of the heath. A trim maid-servant ushered her into an ordinary sitting room of the furnished-house type, and a few minutes later transferred her to a larger apartment where a woman was seated writing at a table.

"Miss Brown, my lady," the maid announced.

The woman turned around — a tall, dark woman, handsome but with restless eyes and gestures. She was apparently still quite young and her voice when she spoke was pleasant enough, but there was a queer sort of uneasiness in her manner as though she were all the time watching for and fearing some untoward happening.

"Have you come from Miss Hamilton's Agency?" she enquired.

Miss Brown acquiesced and presented her testimonials, with which Lady Hannerton, after a brief examination, was evidently impressed.

"What salary do you require?" she asked.

"If I live in, two pounds a week."

"That is not excessive," Lady Hannerton admitted pleasantly. "I have a considerable correspondence, some of which is of a confidential nature, and I do not like my affairs discussed outside this house. Are you to be trusted?"

"My references will answer that question," Miss Brown pointed out.

"I am interested in politics," Lady Hannerton went on, her eyes fixed upon her visitor. "I am thinking of

standing for Parliament very shortly. For that reason I am collecting a great deal of information about people in all conditions of life, and particularly in the Army. My husband was a soldier."

Miss Brown inclined her head.

"The Division for which I wish to stand," her prospective employer continued, "includes a large military vote. For that reason I am visiting a great deal amongst the noncommissioned officers' wives, and even the privates' wives. I have them here to tea sometimes, and address them. I am rather an advanced Liberal in politics, and there are a great many abuses in connection with the military regulations with which I desire to do away. I am offering you this rather lengthy explanation because you may be puzzled at some of my activities."

"I am not a curious person," Miss Brown declared. "I am quite used to obeying orders and doing what I am told."

"I feel sure that you are going to suit me," Lady Hannerton decided. "When can you start work?"

"As soon as you like."

Lady Hannerton considered.

"Will you come down to-morrow morning at the same hour?" she suggested. "That will give me time to have your room ready."

"I will be here," Miss Brown promised.

Lady Hannerton glanced at the clock.

"If you would like some luncheon ——?"

"Thank you very much. I shall be able to get back in time if I leave at once."

"Very good then. I shall expect you at this time to-morrow and I warn you that your first day will be a busy one."

"I am not afraid of work."

"There is just one thing more," Lady Hannerton re-

marked. "It isn't really important but I might as well mention it whilst I think of it. I am a tremendous reader. Sometimes I get through three or four novels in a night, and I have a box of books sent down from the *Times* once or twice a week by the train arriving at the station here at six-thirty-three. You are accustomed to taking a little walk sometime during the day, I suppose?"

"I like a certain amount of exercise when it is possible," Miss Brown admitted.

"Very well then. I want this to be one of your daily duties. You walk to the station, meet that train each evening and bring back the box of books in a taxicab, provided of course they are there. Is that understood?"

"Quite, thank you," Miss Brown replied. "The six-thirty-three train. I will be at the station every evening."

Lady Hannerton glanced at the clock once more.

"If you won't stay to lunch," she said, "you had better be going."

At half-past one Miss Brown was back in London. She took a taxicab straight to Soho and a little hesitatingly entered the café. Most of the tables were filled, and to her great relief, Paul, with his arm in a sling, was moving about the room. He came forward eagerly and found her a place.

"Please tell me the news," she begged. "I was so relieved to see that there was nothing in the papers."

"There will be nothing in the papers now or at any time," Paul assured her. "The man whom I beat — you know whom I mean — was taken first to the hospital, but he is back now at his hotel all right. He is not so seriously hurt as he will be if he stays in London much longer."

She shook her head severely.

"Mr. Paul," she said, "that sort of thing may have been all right in St. Petersburg, but you cannot take matters into your own hands like that in England."

He looked down at the tablecloth doggedly.

"Such a man," he insisted, "should not be allowed to live. He is very badly frightened. Perhaps he will go away. Now I will serve you with some luncheon."

He departed and returned presently with a brown pot full of stew. He brought also a cocktail of his own preparing.

"You are a little tired, I think, this morning, Miss Brown," he said. "Please drink this. I hope you will like the stew. It was made by my mother. In the old days it was quite a favourite dish in Russia."

"I know that I shall like it," she assured him. "Now please go and look after your other guests. Then I want to talk to you seriously."

He hurried away to greet some new arrivals, so tall, so loose-limbed that he would have been uncouth but for a sort of felinelike grace with which he moved. There was a straightness of the shoulders too which bespoke military training, and a carriage of the head which Miss Brown had always liked. She drank her cocktail approvingly, and ate her stew with appetite. An under-waiter brought her some fruit and coffee. The place was thinning out a little now, and presently Paul reappeared.

"Sit down a moment, please," she invited. "Tell me who the grey-haired old gentleman is who has just gone out?"

Paul smiled.

"He is one of the lesser known of the Grand Dukes," he confided — "lesser known because he lives in Kensington instead of on the Riviera and prefers to be known by the title of 'General' only. He is one of our society. If my father gives up, he will be president. Miss Brown, you were very good to me last night. You were both of you wonderful. I shall never forget your kindness."

"Yes," she admitted, "I think that we were. I think

that under the circumstances you must make up your mind to do as I ask."

"I will try," he promised her humbly. "I know that I am very impetuous, and the sight of a man like that sets the blood singing inside me. You must not forget that I have seen what you have not seen."

She nodded.

"But, Mr. Paul," she protested, "you must have common sense. You have punished that man very badly. That should be enough. Remember that if it had not been for a fortunate chance you might have been maimed for life yourself, or even killed."

"That is true," he admitted.

"And there are the police too. You cannot go on escaping them in this country. I can quite understand that those people last night, if they had really been spending the evening as you say, preferred to take the law into their own hands, but it might not be always like that. The police have a way of finding out these things for themselves. You are much more useful to yourself and to everybody else free than locked up."

"That is true," he repeated. "What is it you wish me to promise?"

"To let that man alone now."

"I will let him alone," Paul acquiesced. "He has known what it means to be terrified, he has felt my blows all over his body; he is, they tell me, an evil thing to look at. I will let him alone to live in fear lest he should meet me again."

"That is very sensible of you," she said, with a little sigh of relief.

"Now we will speak of that man no more. Miss Brown, will you please be kind to me? On Thursday night I am not going to the Cosmopolitan. They have a cabaret show there, so I shall not be wanted. Will you ask Miss

Austin to come up to town and let us spend the evening together? We can do whatever you like. It would give me great pleasure. We could dine here or where you will."

"I am so sorry," Miss Brown regretted, "but to-morrow morning I am going to the country. I have some work to do there, and I have no idea when I shall be back."

His face fell.

"That I am very sorry to hear," he said — "very sorry indeed."

"I don't know whether Frances will be up while I am away," she added, after a moment's hesitation. "Would you like me to give you her address?"

"Very much indeed," he begged her eagerly. "It would be very kind of you."

She wrote it down. He folded the piece of paper up carefully and placed it in his pocket.

"She will not think it forward of me if I should write?" he asked.

"I am sure she would be glad to hear from you," Miss Brown replied. "We are both very independent young women — circumstances have made us so."

"I think you are both very exceptional," he said hesitatingly. "Is that a good word? I have never known any one like you."

His eyes were suddenly dreamy. Something in his expression reminded her of the afternoon when they had sat side by side under one umbrella on the omnibus. Miss Brown, for all her sedateness, felt a little quiver of the pulses. She knew that he was struggling to say something. She moved uneasily in her place, but his hand suddenly fell upon hers.

"There is one more thing, Miss Brown," he went on, looking into her eyes, "which I should like to say. I hope

you will not mind hearing it. It is about Miss Austin."

Miss Brown smiled encouragingly.

"Well?"

"You know how things are with me here. We are fighting for our very existence. It may not be always like this. There are things which might happen, and I wanted to tell you — you are always so sweet and sympathetic — some day, if she will have me, I want to marry Miss Austin."

Miss Brown sat quite still. He had released her hand now. She took it away and rubbed it gently. She bent over and examined the place where his signet ring had left a little mark. Then she looked up at him very kindly.

"I think Frances is the dearest girl in the world," she confided, "and I am sure that she likes you too. Next time you meet, if I were you, I should tell her just what you have told me."

"You really think," he asked, eagerly, "that she would not be angry?"

"I am quite sure that she would be proud, and I believe glad," Miss Brown declared. "Now I must go. I want to ask you one thing more. What shall you do supposing those men apply for a summons against you?"

He laughed scornfully as he rose to his feet.

"They are just as likely to do that," he assured her, "as to come into this room. For one thing, Bretskopf, the people's envoy here, on what he calls an official visit, was spending the night in a fashion which, if publicly known, would bring disgrace upon him. Then, too, there is his history which I should tell in Court — an English Court, not a Russian one. I shall hear no more of them. They will be afraid to provoke a struggle with me and they certainly will risk nothing just now."

He walked to the door with her and summoned a taxi-

cab, standing on the pavement for a last word, as he handed her in.

"I have not spoken as I should have done of the gratitude which is in my heart," he declared. "I am proud that you two young ladies should have been so wonderfully kind, that you should have permitted me the shelter of your room, and I am glad, Miss Brown, that I found courage to tell you what I am feeling for Miss Frances. I think that no one in the world has a greater gift of sympathy than you."

He bowed like a courtier, with the rain glistening upon his well-brushed but ancient waiter's clothes. Miss Brown leaned hastily back in her taxi. There had been a moment earlier in the day at Whitehall — she leaned a little further back still. It was a great gift — this gift of sympathy.

CHAPTER XXIII

Miss Brown's first few days at Camberley were unproductive of any event of importance. She had to attend to a somewhat voluminous correspondence which plainly indicated the nature of Lady Hannerton's political sympathies. A letter to Thornton begging him not to call without warning, she took note of, and also one to Pennington refusing an invitation to luncheon at the House of Commons until her work in the neighbourhood was finished. She telephoned on several occasions to Dessiter and exchanged a few guarded words. On the fifth morning, Lady Hannerton, in a warm rose-coloured dressing gown, trimmed with fur, came into the small study which had been given up for her use.

"Plenty of work for you this morning, Miss Brown," she announced, handing her two long sheets of paper. "I want three copies of these lists of names. Be careful to get the regimental numbers right and the numbers of the Battalions. Also you will see that after each name there are either one, two, or three crosses, or a query. Those marks tell me just what the political opinions of the men are, and what chance I have of getting them to vote for me. At four o'clock I have twelve or fifteen of the sergeants' wives coming to tea in the other room. I want you to be there with your notebook, and if I use any phrase that seems to you striking, make a note of it. Is that quite clear?"

"Quite clear, thank you," Miss Brown replied.

"I have come to the conclusion," Lady Hannerton went on, after a moment's hesitation, "that you are a person in whom I can place entire trust. I want you

though to preserve all your notebooks and let me have them when you leave. It is a foolish idea of mine, perhaps, but people are so inquisitive and the newspapers might distort the most harmless remarks."

"Certainly," Miss Brown agreed, with immovable face.

Lady Hannerton trailed out, leaving behind her an odour of bath salts and kindred perfumes. Miss Brown bent over her task, typed for some hours, ate her exceedingly moderate luncheon comfortably at a small table drawn up to the fire, and typed again until four o'clock. By that time the lists were finished, and neatly pinned together. Lady Hannerton, looking more attractive than ever in a quiet, but very fashionably made house gown, looked them through, murmured a few words of approval and took Miss Brown with her into the larger room where a score or so of women were seated whispering together. Lady Hannerton greeted them all, smiling.

"I'm so glad you've come to have a little talk with me," she said hospitably. "Do draw up as close to the fire as you can. It seems to get colder and colder. Plenty of toast, please, Mary," she told the parlour maid.

Tea was served, and very beautifully served. Afterwards Lady Hannerton sat in an easy-chair and smoked one of the cigarettes which were handed round.

"Of course you know what my ambition is," she began. "I want to get into Parliament and I must warn you that I am very liberal in my views. I particularly want the vote of every soldier, because being a soldier's widow it is the soldier husband I mean to fight for more than any one else. I tell the General the same thing; I tell all the officers whenever they come here to dine. I think the privates and noncommissioned officers are the worst paid men in the British Army."

There was a little murmur of not unnatural approval.

"I don't know whether you know what the exact scale of pay is," Lady Hannerton went on. "I'll give you each a little pamphlet before you go which will tell you just what a private gets, what a noncommissioned officer gets, and so on all the way up to a general. I want you to keep these pamphlets to yourselves, because not unnaturally they are very unpopular with the authorities, but I can always provide you with some more for your friends. I think you will agree with me that the scale is ridiculous. You will be able to work it out for yourselves, but I'll give you just one instance. The pay for a full private is, after two years' service, three-and-sixpence a day, and the pay for a general five pounds. If I had my way the thing would be on an utterly different basis. It is the noncommissioned officer and the private who risks his life, not the general, who usually has private means of his own, and doesn't need to get twenty times the pay of the soldier he commands. He ought not to have it. People won't talk to you about these things for fear of making you discontented. I want to make you discontented. There, I admit it frankly. You ought to be discontented. Miners, when they want an increase of wage, strike, and get at any rate a portion of what they want. So do the railway men, the dockyard labourers, and every department of labour, and yet all the time the pay of your husbands remains unchanged, because they can't strike and because — you must forgive my saying so — they are not very enterprising in calling attention to their very real grievance. That is why I am going to do it for them."

There was some slight applause, a definite undernote of sympathetic approbation, several questions to which Lady Hannerton replied.

"You have to remember this," she went on presently. "What happens to your husband and you when you go

on the retired list? Is your husband able to enjoy himself for a time, to retire after all his hard work? Not a bit of it. You both of you, husband and wife, have to work a great deal harder than you've ever worked before. Your husband at middle-age has practically to start life again, to find a job as *commissionaire* or watchman or porter, if he's lucky enough to find one going. He may get a situation or he may not, but it's a struggle all the time, a struggle for him and a struggle for you. And it's a struggle which ought not to exist. In the pamphlet which I am going to give you to take away to-night you will find what I suggest should be the amended scale of pay, and if you had it, and your commanding officers so much less, you'd be able to live in self-respect and comfort when your time in the Army was over, and it wouldn't really make so much difference to your officers because they nearly all have money of their own."

"Have to give up a bit of polo, p'raps," one woman suggested.

"The captain of my John's company keeps five race horses," another confided.

"I suppose you all read the papers," Lady Hannerton went on. "You know that preparations are going on for what looks as though it might turn out to be a universal strike. They'll probably want to make use of the Army to do all sorts of work they never ought to be asked to do whilst this trouble is on, but one thing I want to point out to you is that the end of it all will probably be either what we hear so much about nowadays — a revolution — or else considerably higher pay for the miners, the transport workers, the railway men, and all the others, whilst you will remain exactly where you were before."

There was a little uneasy movement amongst the women. Even those who had come in contented and smiling were looking gloomy.

"Her ladyship's right," one woman muttered. "I'll tell my Tom what I think when I get home."

"You must all of you talk to your husbands," Lady Hannerton insisted. "Military discipline is a wonderful thing, of course, but as it's administered here — and my husband was a general, you know — I say that it is only another form of tyranny. The capitalists make use of the Army, and you can't kick because of this military discipline. Well, some day or other the whole thing will come to a head. I will be quite frank with you. Naturally I have more friends amongst the officers than any other class of man, but I tell them all the same thing. I tell them, as I used to tell my husband, that they can't expect flesh and blood to stand the sort of treatment your husbands have to put up with to-day. Sooner or later the tension will break, and where shall we all be? I, for one, daren't think. These people who are going to strike if the capitalists refuse to give up any of their profits, they'll do their best to bring about a revolution, so as to compel a fairer share. Supposing they do, do you think the Government of this country is doing wisely to treat its own soldiers in the way it does, when it knows that the Army's all it has to rely upon to keep these men down? When the riots come, if they do come, you will see a colonel drawing his seven or eight hundred a year, ordering his men, drawing two or three shillings a day, to fight their own countrymen who are struggling for a reasonable wage. What you'll all do about it I can't think. I can only pray that the time won't come until after I have succeeded in getting a seat in Parliament and have called attention to the hideous injustice that is going on in the Army to-day."

There was a brooding silence. One thin-faced woman who had been listening intently all the time ventured to speak.

"Supposing this revolution or anyways rioting should come on account of the strikes," she asked slowly, "is your ladyship suggesting that the Army should refuse to obey orders?"

"I am suggesting nothing," Lady Hannerton answered. "I have simply asked you here to try to make you see clearly the situation as it exists, and to ask you to vote for me when I put up for Parliament. What your husbands may do if they are faced with such a terrible problem as being ordered to fire upon their own countrymen I could not, as a soldier's wife, discuss."

This time, there were very few questions. The women went away for the most part in silence. Miss Brown handed to each a small pamphlet which had been entrusted to her for distribution. One she contrived to slip into her own satchel. As soon as they had all gone, Lady Hannerton threw open the windows and lit a fresh cigarette.

"This makes the seventeenth afternoon within a month to a different crowd of women each time," she confided. "It's hard work."

"I should think so," was the quiet reply. "Do you say the same thing to all of them?"

"Pretty well. Tell me, Miss Brown," Lady Hannerton added, looking at her closely, "what did you think of it all? Are you a sympathiser or do you believe in letting established things remain for ever?"

Miss Brown shook her head.

"I find it best in my position to have no political opinions," she said. "I have work to do for all sorts of people. I try to do the work well, and that is the only thing I think about."

"I suppose," Lady Hannerton reflected, still covertly watching her secretary, "if the General, for instance, were to hear everything I said to these women, I should get into trouble."

Miss Brown made no remark. Her face remained expressionless.

"You took a few notes of what I said, I hope?" her employer continued. "I pretty well know it off by heart, but sometimes I get stuck and I like to refresh my memory."

"I tried my best but you spoke rather quickly," Miss Brown, who had taken down every word Lady Hannerton had said, admitted.

"I shall get you to make out as clear a summary of them as you can, when you have time. My memory is pretty good but I like to read over what I have said sometimes. You had better be off to the station, now. It's just possible the *Times* people may send me down two boxes to-night."

"I will start at once," Miss Brown acquiesced.

Lady Hannerton looked at her approvingly as she turned towards the door.

"Miss Brown," she said, "I feel sure that you are going to suit me very well indeed."

"I am very pleased to hear you say so," was the calm reply. "I hope that when you are in Parliament you will continue to need my services."

A queer little smile parted Lady Hannerton's lips.

"When I am in Parliament, Miss Brown," she promised, "I will certainly have no other secretary."

CHAPTER XXIV

On the fifth evening after Lady Hannerton's friendly political talk to the soldiers' wives, Miss Brown, making her usual pilgrimage to the station, received an unexpected and for the moment terrifying shock. The train had just come to a standstill and she was waiting on the platform by the guard's van, when there issued from a first class carriage Mr. Serge Malakoff, the great master of music, and Noel Frankland. They were only a few yards away, and Miss Brown, afraid of making any violent movement, could do no more than turn around to beckon to a passing porter. When she had received her usual box, however, and made her way after some considerable but purposeful delay out into the station yard there was no sign of the two men. It was dark when, after a few moments' delay at the telephone office, she arrived at the Nook, and she was thankful that with her heavy box to superintend she had every excuse for entering the house by the back door. The moment she was inside she heard familiar voices and realised the presence of the two men in the sitting room. She paused for a brief period of deliberate reflection. A meeting between herself and either of these men might undo all the benefit her visit had achieved, but on the other hand the idea of flight was more than distasteful to her. Suddenly the maid delivered a very welcome message.

"Her ladyship left word, would you mind having a tray up in your room to-night instead of coming down to dinner, Miss Brown?" she said. "She's got two gentlemen — one her parliamentary agent, I think — and she wants to talk business with them."

Miss Brown was certain then that Providence was taking care of her.

"I should like the tray in my room, Susan," she confided, "but would you in a few minutes tell her ladyship that I am very much obliged for her message and that in any case I was going to ask if she would excuse me this evening. I have a bad headache and I am going to bed."

"That would be all right, Miss, I'm sure," the girl replied. "These gentlemen have been here before and they always stay until the last train."

Miss Brown hurried up to her room, took off some of her clothes and locked the door. Firmly established in her character of invalid she drew a breath of relief. Downstairs she could clearly distinguish Frankland's raucous tone, Lady Hannerton's occasional little peal of soft laughter, Malakoff's thin, sneering interventions. Her hands stole out to her notebook which lay on the table by her side. There was a word or two of Frankland's worth recording.

Lady Hannerton had greeted her visitors with some indications of disappointment.

"But where," she asked, "is Nicholas Bretskopf?"

Malakoff sighed.

"The victim of an unfortunate accident, dear lady," he confided. "He will not be able to present himself in public for several days. He sent you his apologies and his profound regrets."

"The one man from whom I have been expecting to get a little fresh inspiration!" Lady Hannerton complained. "You, dear Serge Malakoff — I know your point of view by heart — Mr. Frankland's is what I call copybook communism. From Bretskopf I hoped for a new outlook."

"Bretskopf, too," Malakoff declared, settling himself into an easy-chair and glancing reflectively at the sideboard, "was disappointed. He approves highly of your work. It was what the other side were pleased to call the 'corruption' of the Army and Navy which made things so much easier for us in Russia. It was touch and go there too, if people had only known it, for many of the rank and file worshipped Nicholas. Fortunately you have no popular figure in the English Army."

"I think that my work is having its effect," Lady Hannerton admitted thoughtfully. "At the same time it is dangerous — even more dangerous than it seems. There are one or two of the women who are absolutely devoted to me, and whose husbands are entirely on our side, and I had a word of warning yesterday — one young staff officer has been detailed to go round and make enquiries as to exactly what I do say to these women. I shouldn't be surprised if I got an official visit at any moment. Then, Thornton doesn't make it more easy," she went on. "The man's a fanatic. Courage is all very well, but he hasn't an ounce of discretion. I get the placards down here for him quite safely. They come in a *Times*' library box by the six-thirty-three train several nights a week. He calls later and collects them. His methods though are perfectly terrible. He scarcely waits for the lights out bugle. A few nights ago he pasted over a thousand of the placards all round an encampment where he was continually within fifty yards of the sentries. Even though he's only a reservist I should think he would be liable to be shot on sight if he were caught."

Malakoff rolled a cigarette with long, skinny fingers. His frequent glances towards the sideboard produced at last the desired effect.

"Vermouth or sherry?" his hostess enquired.

"Vermouth — mixed, if you have both sorts — with a

little lemon," was the prompt reply. "Frankland will join me, I know. We've had a nervy time lately. We're getting into our last stride, drawing the threads together, and it is difficult work. We've got the emergency meeting of the Trades Union Congress to tackle next week and everything depends upon their decisions."

The woman at the sideboard mixed drinks for the two men and brought them over. Malakoff gulped his down greedily.

"Then there's a new man in Dessiter's place," he went on. "Glyde, they call him. No one knows where he came from or what his job was before, but he's no fool. You've heard of him down here?"

Lady Hannerton shook her head.

"Not yet," she replied. "I agree with you though, it's a nervy time. I wanted to see you, because I think it's better that we have a clear understanding. I'm not going to stay here for the great flare up. My work is very nearly finished, and a good thing it is, for I'm getting very near the thin edge of things. I'm for Monte Carlo next month. When does the Miners' Federation meet?"

"The day after the emergency meeting of the Trades Unions," Frankland replied. "The transport workers, railways and seamen follow the next day. Pennington is responsible for our staff work, and I must admit it's a marvel."

"And what will interest your ladyship more," Malakoff remarked with an acid smile, "is that we voted you what you asked for last night — five thousand pounds. That should enable you to clear things up here properly and have a little in your pocket for Monte Carlo."

"You dear man!" she exclaimed, with glistening eyes.

Malakoff produced a fat notebook and laid it upon the table. Suddenly she listened for a moment, leaned forward and covered it with her hand. There was the sound

of the tramping of horses' hoofs outside, and a firm footstep up the paved path.

"I knew something of this sort would happen," she cried, in an agitated tone. "Here's the General! Quick! Slip into that little room behind!"

She opened the communicating doors and closed them again behind the two men. Then she flung herself upon the sofa, lit a cigarette and took up a novel. The maid threw open the door.

"General Maltravers, my lady," she announced.

The General, a short, sturdy man, with iron grey hair and bronzed complexion, entered with some clanking of spurs. Lady Hannerton gave him her hand which he raised gallantly to his lips. From the moment of his entrance, however, she guessed his errand.

"You haven't come to tell me you can't dine to-morrow night?" she asked anxiously.

"Can't say that that was the object of my visit," he admitted, bringing a chair up to the side of her couch. "I'm afraid I sha'n't be able to manage it though."

"Henry!" she exclaimed reproachfully.

"You see, it's like this, Mona," he went on. "I've had a word or two with you on the subject before, but this time — er — we've got to tackle it seriously. Of course you married dear old Hannerton, and all that, and became one of us, so to speak, and we've always treated you as such, but I daresay the fact that you lived in Russia when you were young rather sets these people talking considering your liberal ideas and that sort of thing."

She nodded.

"Yes," she confessed, "it's quite true that I have liberal ideas. You don't want me to be like these other women, do you, Henry? You always said that I interested you because I was different. They have nothing to

talk about, nothing to think about, except their bridge or their servants or their tennis or the misdemeanours of the colonel's wife, or the flirtations of some one else, or the general hardships of an Army life. You don't want me to get into that rut?"

"Of course not," he admitted with a nervous cough. "You're a clever woman — treat to talk to you and all that. All the same, Mona, these — er — socialistic talks of yours to all the people round here, especially to the soldiers' wives, have got to stop."

She made a little grimace.

"But why, Henry?" she begged. "I'm sure it's good for them to make them think. They're human beings, even if they are soldiers' wives."

"Look here," he persisted, and there was a ring of something unusual in his tone, "you and I are pals, you know, Mona, but I haven't come to see you this afternoon as a pal. I've come to see you as the General in command of the district here, and I tell you that people are talking in a very queer fashion about you and what seems to be your propaganda. I think if I were you — and you know very well how I hate to say it — I'd leave the neighbourhood for a time."

She sat up on the couch, and her soft fingers stole invitingly towards his hand. He rose at once to his feet and stood upon the hearthrug with his back to the fire and his hands clasped behind him.

"I've told you in what capacity I'm here, Mona," he continued, "and we've got to face this thing out. There's a great deal of uneasiness throughout the camp. They're worrying me at the War Office about it. It's gone so far that we practically decided to chuck our winter manœuvres. Some fellow's putting up placards all over the place, — absolutely anarchistic — appealing to the men to elect their own officers, pool up the pay and that

sort of tommy-rot. The man who's responsible for those posters will be shot on sight when we catch him, but there's no doubt that a lot of harm's been done. This talk of yours to the women may be exactly what you mean it to be — nothing but enlightened politics — but it's tending the same way as this infernal propaganda and it's got to stop from this moment."

Lady Hannerton rose slowly to her feet. To all appearance she was not discomposed, but there was a smouldering fire in her eyes.

"You're a little dictatorial, aren't you?" she asked. "I am not a soldier, you know."

"I am speaking with authority," was the blunt reply. "You are living in a military area here, as you've a perfect right to do as poor old Dick's widow, but you come under a certain phase of military jurisdiction, and I don't want any misunderstanding. You were talking of going to Monte Carlo quite soon. Go there at the end of this week. Be out of here by Sunday if you can manage it. Have the house empty by Monday."

"Is this a new form of military autocracy?" she demanded.

The General had taken his header now and was not the man to mince his words.

"You can call it what you like," he answered. "Here it is though, straight from me, straight, if you prefer it, from the War Office. We want you out of here within the week, and furthermore I may as well tell you that this house has been placed out of bounds for the soldiers, and for their wives too."

"What am I supposed to be, if you please?" she asked, turning a little pale.

"There's no proof of anything against you. The long and short of it is, however, that determined efforts are being made by these damned Communists to get at the

soldiers, and the authorities don't like the subject matter of your talks to the women."

"How do they know what I say?"

"Never mind. They do know. They seem to have a complete copy of your last address to the wives of the noncommissioned officers you invited here to tea. It isn't pleasant reading either."

"So this is what one gets," she sighed, putting one foot on the fender and looking up into his face, "for trying to do a little good in the world."

"I don't know anything about that," the General replied. "I don't question your motives. I simply say that in conjunction with these damnable placards and pamphlets, and the strikes coming on and all that, your attitude on social affairs isn't appreciated down here. I've delivered my ultimatum: no more of those talks and out of here before Monday morning. That ends my visit officially."

"Now please say something nice to me then, Henry," she begged. "Let me give you a mixed vermouth."

He nodded, accepted the drink and a cigarette which she lit for him. He passed his right arm round her waist and even accepted and returned the caress of her lips as she leaned against him.

"I'm damned sorry, of course, Mona," he said. "It's been ripping having you here, but it's brought me right up against the red tape at the War Office. You've been jolly indiscreet without a doubt, and — this comes from me as a pal," he went on, dropping his voice — "there's a pretty well authenticated rumour that you've got some undesirable friends. Cut loose from the whole thing and get off without a moment's delay. Get over to Monte Carlo or somewhere and forget it all. I'm damned sorry to have you go, but it's got to be, for both our sakes. I'll get a bit of leave later on, I expect, but believe me,

Mona — and now I'm saying more than I should do, God forgive me — there's a treble-headed secret service working now — Home Office, Military and Police — and they're no fools. That's enough, isn't it? "

"Yes, that's enough," she sighed.

"By the bye," he went on, "who were those two queer-looking chaps I heard give your address to a taxicab man at the station an hour ago — fellow with a pointed, black beard — looked like any sort of a scoundrel? "

Lady Hannerton laughed softly.

"That was Malakoff, — the greatest musician in the world," she confided. "The man with him was his secretary."

"Malakoff — chap whose music all the papers are raving about? " the General mused. "Don't like the look of him but I suppose a chap like that can look as he damn well pleases."

"It is a great honour that he should come down to see me," she observed. "I, too, was once something of a musician, you know."

The General glanced out through the rain-streaming window to where his orderly was walking his horse up and down in the dark street.

"This is my last visit, Mona," he told her. "Sorry things have got to come to an end like this. I may get up to town on Sunday night for dinner — not at the Club though. We'll try a quiet place."

"Our farewell! " she murmured. "I should love it, Henry — but why not at the Club? "

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Frankly I daren't be seen with you," he confided.

"You mean that I am a suspected person? "

"No use beating about the bush. That's exactly what you are. They've got it up against you somehow. I'll give you a final word of warning. You'll probably be

watched from this moment until you leave. I'll send you a line about Sunday."

He kissed her fingers, then her lips, and took his leave. She peered through the gloom and watched him pass down the narrow path and mount lightly, notwithstanding his fifty years, to his saddle. Then, with a little shrug of the shoulders, she threw open the folding doors.

"Dinner in a quarter of an hour," she announced to the two men. "You can wash your hands in the lavatory across the hall."

Noel Frankland jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the road. She answered the note of enquiry in his face with a nod.

"Finis," she assented. "One of the women must have given me away. I have to be out of the neighbourhood by Monday."

CHAPTER XXV

The parlour maid who brought up Miss Brown's tray later on in the evening was more communicative than usual. She told Miss Brown of the General's visit, and made a few comments thereon. On the subject of the dinner which she had served below, however, she was almost eloquent.

"I've waited on gentlefolks of all sorts for the last ten years," she declared, "but never in my life have I seen any one drink like the foreign gentleman and his friend. Her ladyship's quite moderate herself but they finished three bottles of champagne for dinner, after starting with a bottle of Sauterne, and the best part of a bottle of vermouth before they sat down. And eating — why the thin little foreign gentleman reminded me of nothing but a wolf. They've just had in a fresh pot of coffee and another bottle of brandy, and I've telephoned to the station for a taxi to catch the twelve-thirty train. How they'll ever get into it I don't know. You'll ring if you want anything more, Miss."

"I'm sure I sha'n't, thanks," Miss Brown replied. "I'll leave my tray outside."

The maid took her leave and Miss Brown dined with a book propped up in front of her. A sense of excitement which she did not altogether understand affected her appetite to some extent, and as soon as she had concluded a slight meal and drunk one glass of wine she put the tray outside and turning down her light, made her way to the window. The Nook was the last of a row of irregular detached villas situated at the end of a newly made boulevard, beyond which was a rough belt of heath land, lead-

ing to some small pine woods. Although it was not without a taint of suburbanism, it was a lonely spot enough owing to the stretch of open country upon which it bordered. Miss Brown sat there waiting and listening, and in due course her long vigil was rewarded. A tall, soldierly figure emerged from the gloom which hung over the heath, opened the gate of the Nook and made his way towards the back door. He was apparently admitted without question and for some time afterwards everything went on as usual. From the main road some distance away, one could hear the clanging of the electric cars, from the railway came the occasional shrill whistle of a locomotive, from downstairs in the dining room came the frequent rumble of voices. The boulevard seemed empty. Miss Brown began to wonder whether that telephone message, so urgently demanded from her, had miscarried, whether some wholly uninterested person had received the information that Lady Hannerton's box of books from the *Times'* library had arrived by the six-thirty-three train and had been duly delivered. And then her heart gave a little start. Without any sign of their approach, without any sound of which she was conscious, she realised that a man was standing at the side entrance, another on the front path, another in the garden, another out in the street, men as like one another as sheep, for they all wore khaki, and they all carried bayonets.

Amongst the little company in the dining room into which Thornton had made his unexpected entrance there was instantaneous dismay. Malakoff rose at once to his feet in alarm. Lady Hannerton, too, was obviously disturbed.

"Didn't you get my message, Mr. Thornton?" she asked. "I telephoned to the number you gave me begging you not to come to-night."

"I got the message," Thornton replied. "I came all the same. What's wrong?"

"For one thing Mr. Malakoff and Mr. Frankland are here," Lady Hannerton explained quickly — "they mustn't be associated with this — and for another the whole business has got to end altogether for a time. The General has been down here. I have orders to leave the neighbourhood. The house is suspected."

"I've been a soldier," Thornton rejoined shortly, "and I don't quit my job because it's dangerous. As for those two," he went on, glowering across at Malakoff and his companion, "they are in the game. If there's danger why shouldn't they share it?"

"You're talking like a fool, Thornton," Frankland exclaimed harshly. "You have your work and we have ours. I admit yours is the more dangerous, but you chose it. You were the suitable person for it. This house is suspected and if you're caught here to-night and it comes out that Malakoff and I were here there'll be the devil to pay. For God's sake chuck it. Get away where you came from. Leave the house this minute."

"Quickly!" Malakoff insisted. "Quickly!"

Thornton laughed scornfully. He picked up the brandy decanter, poured himself out half a wineglassful and tossed it off.

"You're a chicken-livered pair of comrades," he declared. "What I'm going to do is this. I'm going to the kitchen and I'm going to take out two armfuls of my placards and carry them across the heath to where I've left my motor bicycle, and no one's going to stop me. To-morrow they'll be on every tree and wall between here and Wokingham. So that's that!"

He swung round on his heel and left the room. They heard his footsteps in the passage. Malakoff was standing up nervously clutching at his beard.

"The man is mad!" he exclaimed. "Mad! I should have thought after your telephone message he'd have had the sense to stay away. My overcoat and hat quick! Come on, Frankland! We'll walk to the station."

"I think you're wise," Lady Hannerton agreed. "What a fool the man is! He calls it courage, I suppose. I'll show you where your things are."

They hurried out into the passage, and afterwards Lady Hannerton herself opened the front door for them and stood watching whilst they stumbled down the narrow path. At the gate, however, a tall figure loomed out of the darkness.

"You're not allowed to pass for the present, sir," a man in uniform told them.

"Why not?" Frankland demanded. "What's wrong and who are you?"

"I'm a sergeant of the Military Police, sir," the man replied. "The house is being searched. Until the officer in charge or the police sergeant with him give permission no one is allowed to leave."

"But we want to catch a train," Malakoff protested. "We've just been dining with Lady Hannerton."

"Sorry, sir," the man regretted. "You will doubtless have permission to leave in a few minutes."

The door was opened again. Lady Hannerton stood there framed in the little shaft of light.

"What is it?" she asked anxiously.

The two men made their way back to the house and into the dining room without speech.

"It's that b . . . . y fool Thornton's let us in for this," Malakoff muttered. "He's done for himself too. The police are in the house, or the military, or some one."

Lady Hannerton subsided into a chair with a smothered cry. Malakoff, with trembling fingers, filled his glass from the decanter. Frankland, cursing silently but volubly,

walked up and down the room with his hands in his pockets.

Down in the basement kitchen, Thornton looked up from his task of unpacking the box of pamphlets straight into the eyes of fate. The three men had entered the kitchen so silently that he had heard nothing of their approach. There was a young officer — Captain Marsh, who by some ugly dispensation of fate had been a subaltern in his own regiment — a military policeman and a civilian police sergeant, and in the doorway behind a couple of private soldiers. Instinctively he sprang to attention at the sight of the officer — an impulse checked almost as soon as conceived. He stood glaring across at the newcomers with a roll of the placards in his left hand.

"Thornton, isn't it?" Captain Marsh asked, with a dangerous quietness. "Used to be Sergeant Thornton, V. C. What are those placards you are holding?"

"Read one and see," Thornton replied, passing across the handful.

The officer read one through, tore it into pieces, flung the fragments upon the floor and trampled upon them.

"You are under arrest, Thornton," he announced. "Better take it quietly."

"You can't arrest me," was the truculent reply. "I'm not on the Active List. I'm not subject to military discipline."

"It happens," Captain Marsh confided, "that since two o'clock this afternoon, when a slight change was made in the law, you are, but you can have it which way you like. There's a sergeant of the civil police here. If you prefer to go with him, you will be handed over to us after you have been brought up at Bow Street."

"I don't believe there's been any change in the law," Thornton declared fiercely. "I've had enough of the

b . . . . y Army. I won't be tried by court-martial. It's an abominable farce, a brutal survival."

"That may be your opinion," the officer said sternly, "but the authorities have decided that once a soldier of the King, always a soldier of the King. Until you are finally discharged from the Service your oaths remain and for certain offences you are subject to military discipline."

From upstairs came the sound of Malakoff's and Frankland's unwilling reëntrance into the house. Captain Marsh's attention was momentarily distracted, and in that second Thornton had taken a step backwards. His hand flashed into his pocket and out again. His automatic pistol was pointed straight at the officer's heart.

"I know all about courts-martial," he snarled. "Twenty paces and back against the wall at daybreak, and nothing in the papers — all hushed up. I tell you I'm a citizen now — a Communist, if you want to know — and I've a right to my own opinions. I fought for my country once, and after she'd finished with me she treated me like dirt. The Army wouldn't keep me after the fighting was over; it sha'n't have me now."

Captain Marsh looked into the muzzle of the pistol held as firmly as a rock. With his left hand he prevented the others from any movement.

"You've a right to your opinions, of course, Thornton," he admitted, "but you've no right to come here and shove treason down the throats of the men who were fighting with you a few years ago. You'll only make it worse for yourself if you don't put that thing away."

"I'm going to use it," Thornton declared, in a voice scarcely raised above a whisper, but full of menace.

In a corner of the kitchen the maid was sobbing. One of the soldiers in the rear was handling his rifle nervously; the other three had obeyed their officer's gesture. There was a breathless moment.

"I don't think you will, Thornton," the threatened man said calmly. "I remember you; you remember me, too, I expect, although I was only a second lieutenant. We were at Loos together. You're not going to tell me that you're the sort of man to kill a fellow soldier in the execution of his duty. I don't believe it. Sergeant, arrest him."

For a single second Thornton hesitated. Then he stepped back. There were two loud reports, two bullets one after the other crashing into his brain. For a moment afterwards he seemed to remain upright, staring. Then he slowly collapsed. Military discipline was for a moment forgotten. A little sob broke from one of the men behind. Marsh stooped down, and there was a mist before his eyes. He was thinking of the time when Thornton had gone over the top singing, and had come back in the grey morning driving half a dozen Germans in front of him.

"Blast these politicians!" he muttered.

At the sound of the firing, Miss Brown had turned away from the window, made a movement towards the door, hesitated and sat down on the edge of the bed. She felt a sudden sickness. Some one had been killed — she knew that. There was death there within a few yards of her. Again she found herself in touch with tragedy, and a deadly faintness stole over her. She pulled herself together at the sound of a knock at the door. Captain Marsh presented himself.

"Miss Brown?" he enquired.

"Yes."

"The Department want you out of this," he announced. "They don't want your name in the paper, you understand, and they don't want the other people in the house to have any idea — well, you understand. There's a car waiting downstairs which will drive you straight back to

London. If you'll allow me I'm going to take you out the back way. The message is that you report to-morrow morning to X. Y. O."

Miss Brown fastened her mackintosh, arranged her hat and picked up her suitcase, which in view of recent happenings she had just packed. The officer escorted her down the back stairs, through the strip of kitchen garden, to the back gate, where a car was waiting.

"What about Lady Hannerton's visitors?" Miss Brown asked.

"We've taken their names and addresses," the officer replied. "That's all we need from them at present."

"And — Thornton?"

"He shot himself," Captain Marsh told her gravely. "It was the best thing — by far the best thing."

CHAPTER XXVI

Miss Brown was probably made of sterner stuff than was suggested by her mild and in its way kindly demeanour — sterner stuff perhaps than she herself realised. She slept well that night in her little room at Shepherd's Market, prepared her breakfast as usual the next morning and made her punctual appearance in Whitehall. Her return to her duties was marked by nothing in the way of enthusiastic greetings or congratulations. Dessiter simply looked up from his desk, waved her to her place, and smiled. The smile itself, however, was a rare occurrence.

"Well done, Miss Brown," he said, turning back to his letters. "You managed that excellently."

Miss Brown divested herself of her coat and hat, arranged her hair by guesswork and walked on air to her seat. She felt as though one of the great ones of the world had stooped down from some high place to pat her on the back and overwhelm her with congratulations. She knew that her instructions had been carried out faithfully and intelligently, and that one laconic sentence of appreciation had set all her blood tingling and filled her with a great and holy satisfaction with life and things in general. Dessiter finished his letter and turned round in his place.

"Plenty more work ahead of us, Miss Brown," he remarked.

"I'm very glad to hear it," she replied. "May I ask a question?"

He nodded.

"So long as it isn't an indiscreet one."

"About Lady Hannerton?"

Dessiter stretched out his hand towards the box of cigarettes, which was never far from his elbow, selected one and lit it.

"She ought to be shot," he said. "We're the sort of fool country, though, that doesn't go in for that sort of thing. Our new establishment depends practically upon an understanding with the authorities that we are not to press for the more rigorous penalties. That's why I worked so hard to get the reservists back under military discipline. It's a soppy business anyhow. Lady Hannerton will be playing *trente et quarante* at Monte Carlo to-morrow night. She is on her way now."

Miss Brown breathed a little sigh of relief.

"She was quite kind to me in her way," she explained, "and I felt — well, it was the first time, you know, that I had done that sort of work — I felt rather a sneak."

Dessiter looked at her for a moment curiously through the wreaths of cigarette smoke.

"Yes, I suppose you would," he remarked. "That's what makes you such a perfect agent for certain odd enterprises. But it makes me doubt very much whether you would succeed in the profession generally. Have you seen the papers this morning?"

"Not yet," Miss Brown confessed.

"The fight's about to begin," Dessiter confided. "The miners have handed in their notices."

"And the railways?" Miss Brown enquired.

"No definite information yet," Dessiter replied, "or from the transport workers. It depends what their tactics are going to be. If they really mean the worst sort of mischief, they'll try to work this newly appointed committee of Trades Union secretaries to force every one out and paralyse the whole country. If they're going in for more moderate methods, then they'll probably run the strikes consecutively so as not to use up all the Trades

Union funds. They're hard at it now, arguing and trying to make up their minds."

"Who decides?"

"It's rather hard to say. They're all mixed up in it. There's the Central Committee of the Communist Party, there are the secretaries of the independent Trades Unions, and there's this Amalgamated Society of the Secretaries of the Trades Unions, which we don't know much about yet. Then there are these blasted foreigners over here, who have some say about it because of their financial support. They are one of the most dangerous elements in the whole thing, but we're dealing with them. We're using their own methods. We're watching. We're giving them plenty of rope but somehow or other I rather believe, Miss Brown, that we shall be able to spring a surprise upon Malakoff and his friends. You see, where we score is, thanks to the fact that they never got hold of your notes, they don't know how much we know. They daren't begin to land those arms, for instance. They're not sure that we're not waiting to intercept them. Their food supplies we can't touch, but as regards that we are making our own provision. Our new establishment is a great help. I have men now in Cardiff, Newport, Derby, Glasgow and all the ports."

"How soon do you think anything will happen?" Miss Brown asked.

"Not for a week or a fortnight, at any rate," Dessiter replied. "By the bye, during that time I may be here or I may not. Come and go at your usual time and you will find every morning upon your desk all the work you can get through. For instance, there's a day's work there now. The lists that are to be copied must be sealed and handed over by you to a representative from X. Y. O., Scotland Yard, who will come, when you telephone."

"What am I to say if there are any callers?"

"There will be none. You must remember that this block of government buildings finishes on the seventh floor. These rooms have no recognised existence. Our telephone is a separate line, and you won't find the name of 'Mr. John Glyde' in the book. There are two *commissionaires* on duty night and day on the seventh floor, where the lift and staircase end, and no one is allowed to ascend higher unless they have a pass from X. Y. O., Scotland Yard, or the War Office. You have your key of the door?"

Miss Brown showed it to him, attached to a chain which went round her neck.

"Mergen and his wife live up here. That is all. They'll keep the rooms tidy and Mrs. Mergen would cook a meal if you wanted one. Deal with any emergency that may occur according to your discretion."

"You talk as though you were going away for some time," Miss Brown remarked.

"My movements are uncertain," Dessiter answered. "I am going out now. I may be back later in the day — perhaps not for two or three days. I shall leave no address — not even for you."

He made his way through the door which communicated with his private apartment, and Miss Brown began upon her pile of letters. When he reappeared in about half an hour, she noticed with interest the changes in his appearance. They were slight in their way, and yet significant. All the variations which had transformed Colonel Dessiter into John Glyde were slightly emphasized. With extraordinarily little help from artificial means, no one in the world would have recognised Colonel Dessiter in the older man of languid appearance who walked with a slight shuffle.

"Your verdict, Miss Brown?" he asked.

"I think you're quite wonderful," she assured him.

"You haven't a wig, you're not made up, there isn't anything about you to attract any attention whatever, yet I don't believe a soul in the world would believe that you are the man I found lying upon the couch in Lombertson Square. I shouldn't have recognised you."

"My youthful experience in theatricals helps," he remarked. "I was taught then to make up psychologically rather than with the aid of Clarkson. However, I'm going out by the back way and stepping into a closed motor car."

"I wonder where you're going?" she murmured, a little wistfully.

"As a matter of fact, Miss Brown, I don't mind telling you," he confided — "it isn't a dead secret anyhow — I'm going to meet the two representatives of X. Y. O., from Scotland Yard and the War Office across at Downing Street, and we're going to have a little friendly chat with the Prime Minister. There are just one or two little things I've kept back until the right moment. Queer fellows these politicians. Spring your information upon them all at once and they think you've got a bee in your bonnet. Give it to them piecemeal and hesitatingly, and they believe you. *Au revoir*, Miss Brown."

"*Au revoir*, Mr. John Glyde."

The mysterious chief of X. Y. O. lingered for a moment upon the threshold — a distinguished and handsome elderly gentleman, dressed in the most correct of town clothes — Dessiter had always worn tweeds — and with a slight limp which necessitated his leaning occasionally upon a rubber-shod stick — a limp which seemed to proclaim itself somehow as proceeding from an old wound.

"Miss Brown," he said, with some diffidence.

"Yes, Mr. Glyde," she answered, turning around.

"Have you spent all that money?"

She laughed softly.

"Not a twentieth part of it."

"If I might make the suggestion without offence," he continued — "especially now as you are freed from any anxiety as regards your future income — why not spend some of it upon clothes?"

Miss Brown's blue eyes opened a little wider. She glanced at her hat and mackintosh hanging up in a corner, remembered the shininess of one sleeve of her frock, was acutely conscious of the patch upon her shoe.

"Clothes?" she repeated.

"Clothes," he said firmly — "hats, coats, frocks. You've got the money."

"Somehow or other," she faltered, "I always looked upon that money as being for an emergency."

"The emergency has arrived," he insisted. "See to it, Miss Brown — some time to-day. Good-bye!"

He departed, closing the door after him.

Late that night, Noel Frankland, interviewed by a little stream of reporters at his offices in Kingsway, delivered his historical reply which formed the headline next morning of every newspaper in London.

"What is it you want on behalf of the men, Mr. Frankland?" he was asked.

Frankland passed his hand through his untidy masses of hair, struck the table before him, and raised his voice.

"We want the mines," he declared.

CHAPTER XXVII

During the next few days history repeated itself. The price of coal soared, shares in all the great industrials and textiles dropped, all sorts of contradictory reports were floating around, but the chief centre of interest was the railways. This was the first time a strike had been planned and organised entirely at the dictates of the Communist Party, without initiation from, with scarcely the endorsement of the Trades Unions. The whole world felt that there was something sinister in Frankland's declaration, that this strike had been undertaken from no ordinary motives, not for shorter hours, not even for increased pay, but as the prelude to something more serious, the prelude, it might be, to a concerted attack upon every industry of England — an attack which could have but one meaning. The mine owners met once or twice in secret but made no move. Masters and men remained deliberately apart, and for the first few days no attempt was made either at arranging a conference or demanding a plain statement from either side. The first signs of panic began of themselves in the industrial world and amongst the general public there existed a breathless anxiety to know the worst, to know what was going on behind the closed doors of the headquarters of the Communist Party, what sort of alliance, if any, they had made with the associated Trades Unions. Everywhere the air was full of rumours. The members of the Railway Executive declined singly and collectively to open their mouths to any journalist, yet all the time there was immense activity amongst the representatives of the various Unions and sub-committees of the Communist and Socialist parties.

A meeting of His Majesty's Privy Council was held and the situation discussed at great length without much enlightenment. The Cabinet met twice but not even the best informed of the newspapers ventured upon a surmise as to the counter-steps which the Government was proposing. There was an air everywhere of complete but breathless calm. It was felt that in all probability the forces representing Labour and Capital were preparing themselves for the greatest industrial struggle the world had ever known. In the meantime Malakoff's opera was produced with great success, and Malakoff himself was acclaimed to the echo. To the one or two interviewers, however, who forsook the subject of music and endeavoured to obtain his views upon the English industrial situation, he was dumb.

"I was a politician in my own country," he said, "and my opinions and convictions are well-known. Here, I am a guest and I have nothing to say."

It was a statement which produced a smile amongst certain officials of Whitehall and Scotland Yard who had become accurately informed of various of Malakoff's activities, and even one or two newspapers hinted that if the great musician really had scruples about interfering in the politics of a foreign country, it was strange that he should pass five or six hours daily in the offices of the Communist Party in Kingsway. What was said or done behind those closed doors, however, no one knew. Every hour there was a fresh rumour. One felt that if the Red Party were really in the ascendency amongst all these conferences of Labour and the Unions, they showed immense dramatic foresight and imagination by this sinister and depressing silence.

In the midst of it all, Frances came up to London. Miss Brown found her entering the flat one evening as she herself returned from Whitehall.

"No telling how long there'll be petrol or coal to carry us anywhere," Frances announced, "so I thought I'd come up and have a final fling. But heavens, what's happened to you, Edith? Turn around. A new fur coat, and what a pretty one — and hat too! — and a new frock underneath! Why, child, have you any idea how attractive you are looking?"

Miss Brown flushed as she slipped off her coat and little pull-over hat, and stooped to light the stove.

"I don't know why I'd let myself get so shabby," she said. "Even my employer hinted that it was time I bought some clothes, so I did."

"An employer who takes an interest in one's clothes," Frances remarked, as she lit a cigarette, "becomes at once intriguing. Give me a full description of Mr. John Glyde."

"I've told you all about him already," Miss Brown reminded her. "He's elderly, very stern and yet quite kind. He's absolutely indifferent to women, and I am quite sure he would never have noticed my clothes but for the fact that I am in a government office. My shoes were patched, my dress was shiny and the fur of that old coat of mine was in a disgraceful state."

Frances contemplated her friend for a moment or two in silence.

"Well, I daresay that's all right," she said. "You seem to be taking a great deal more interest in life lately — and you've changed somehow. I suppose you really are pretty, Edith, in your way — dainty figure, nice voice ——"

"Please be quiet."

"It's really rather a blow to me," Frances went on. "I always used to consider myself the more attractive when we went out together. I'm not so sure of it now."

"Don't be an idiot!" Miss Brown exclaimed. "Who

ever would look at an insignificant little thing like me when you are about, with that beautiful figure of yours and your lovely features?"

"Don't seem to do me any good," Frances sighed. "All the hopeless sort of men seem to take a fancy to me. Lend me threepence for a bath, Edith."

She started the geyser and strolling back again began to divest herself of her clothes.

"A young farmer down at Meadowley," she recounted, "comes in smelling of cows, red faced and burly, taps his leggings all the time with an ash stick, and can't think of anything to say — he's one of my admirers. If I married him I should have to do my own work in a small, ugly farmhouse. I'm not sure that I shouldn't have to do the washing too. And as for the other domestic details ——"

"Please don't ——" Miss Brown interrupted.

"All right," Frances agreed, reaching up for her dressing gown. "Then there's Mr. Noel Frankland, a married man without education, whose chief feeling for me was a feverish desire to get me to pay a fleeting visit with him to some seaside resort — an incident in his life, like his bottle of wine or a new box of cigars."

"Well, thank goodness you won't see anything of Mr. Noel Frankland this time," Miss Brown declared. "He wouldn't dare to be seen dancing just now."

"Mr. Noel Frankland is a forgotten dream," Frances acknowledged. "All the same it is rather thrilling to think that I might perhaps have been a Charlotte Corday, have marched through the streets by his side, waving a red banner, uncrowned Queen of the Revolution!"

"There's Mr. Paul," Miss Brown ventured.

Frances was silent. She took up her sponge and towel.

"Yes," she admitted, "there's Mr. Paul. Another instance of my damnable luck. Anybody could fall in love

with Mr. Paul, and there he is, the dear boy, without a penny in the world and a family to support. Come and fetch me out, Edith, if I stew too long."

Miss Brown, after a little hesitation, produced from her wardrobe, and slipped on, one of her two new evening gowns, black, very simple but very attractive. She arranged her hair with her usual deliberation, made a careful selection from amongst her new stock of shoes and stockings, and finally looked at herself in the glass. The colour flushed delicately in her cheeks. Perhaps Frances was right. Perhaps after all she was not so utterly unattractive. And yet, what was the good of it? She was looking perhaps better than she had ever looked in her life — for what purpose? Mr. Paul would have no eyes for anybody but Frances; the casual admiration of strangers meant nothing to her. The person who had incited her to this extravagance was never likely to see its results. She turned away from the glass with a little sigh to find Frances watching her with a smile, half surprised, half quizzical.

"Not keeping any secrets from me, are you, Edith?"

"Of course I am not. Why?"

"I was just wondering for whose sake this transformation was," she observed. "I must say you do things thoroughly when you're about it. Just a touch of my lipstick and you'd look like a demure but not unapproachable little mannequin."

"I should hate to use lipstick almost as much as I should hate to look like a mannequin," Miss Brown replied quietly. "I had to have a new frock. I am sure even you will admit that. I hope you think it's all right."

"I think it's one of the prettiest I ever saw," Frances assured her, sitting down and beginning to brush her hair. "All the same I can't help thinking there's something behind it all. I hope it isn't Mr. Paul."

Miss Brown took up the evening paper.

"Please hurry," she begged. "I had lunch at one o'clock, and I was too busy for tea."

They found the little restaurant only moderately well filled. Paul, who had been standing in an attitude of listless dejection exchanging a few remarks with an habitué of the place, glanced up at their entrance and was across the room in half a dozen strides. His expression was transformed. For the first moment he scarcely seemed to see Miss Brown in her new frock. His eyes shone as he looked at Frances. Then he raised her fingers to his lips.

"It is wonderful to see you — both," he added rapidly, turning to exchange greetings with Miss Brown. "It is a great pleasure, and so unexpected."

He led them to a table.

"It is an excellent night that you choose to come," he continued. "I bought some very good pheasants this morning, quite cheap, and there is some soup which is tolerable. Excuse me whilst I hand in your order."

Miss Brown looked after his departing figure and sighed.

"The first man who has seen me in my new frock didn't even notice it."

"And I don't think you cared much whether he did or not."

Miss Brown crumbled a roll between her fingers.

"I am only human," she murmured, "and I like Mr. Paul."

"I am very human indeed," Frances observed, her eyes fixed in pleasant anticipation upon the waiter who was approaching with two *apéritifs* upon a tray, "and I like him, I am quite sure, better than you do."

Paul returned presently with their half bottle of claret.

"I do not go any longer to the Cosmopolitan," he announced, a little abruptly. "When I added it up I found

that it did not pay. I had to leave here too early and there were so many who did not understand the situation — who asked for me to dance with them and gave nothing."

"Like me," Miss Brown murmured.

"And me," Frances echoed.

He smiled down at them.

"Now and then of course I dance with my friends," he said. "It is always understood that I am permitted to do that, but at times I have been fetched by a head waiter to dance with a very unattractive stranger, and have danced with her five or six times, tried to improve her steps, and then she has thought that all is well if she offers me a glass of wine. Can such a woman, I wonder, think that one dances with her for pleasure? However, I do better now. I have an engagement at a small night club which has just been opened."

"We will go there," Miss Brown suggested. "Perhaps you can find some one to dance with me."

Paul hesitated.

"I have not quite made up my mind about the place yet," he confessed. "I have only been there twice myself. It seems all right."

"The police have never troubled you about that Clarges Street affair?" Frances enquired.

He shook his head.

"I did not expect that they would. It would have been a very bad thing for Bretskopf if his name had got into the paper in connection with such a case. I think some of his friends have been looking for me, but they will find it hard to do me a mischief. I keep myself in training."

"Do you believe these alarmists," Frances asked, "who go about declaring that there will be a revolution as a result of these strikes?"

"I think that there will never be a revolution in Eng-

land," he pronounced confidently. "It is the great desire of those who now rule my country, but I do not think that they will succeed. You have a dozen or so of mob leaders — one or two of them intelligent men enough — who make wild speeches, but most of them do it not really out of conviction but to keep in touch and favour with their followers. England is not the country for a revolution. There is not that wild element in the brains of the people. There are some extremists, of course, but the peace-loving, law-abiding masses are too strong. We hear the thunder, but it is the thunder which will clear the air."

"You are very consoling," Frances remarked. "Theoretically I am a confirmed socialist, but, though I swear at it all the time, I should hate to share my chicken farm with any one."

Their dinner was brought and Paul returned to his duties. His sister came and said a few polite words; his father rose in his place and addressed a courtly bow to them; Madame beamed a little sedately from her desk. Afterwards they were left alone for a time.

"I am quite convinced," Miss Brown said, "that this young man is in love with you."

"I wonder whether he is," Frances reflected.

"I watched his face when he saw us come in. It was boyish but very attractive. He never even noticed my new frock," Miss Brown added pathetically.

"If you want admirers," Frances began ——

"I don't. At least not casual ones."

"They have to be casual at first. I rather liked that young man Greatson. I think he'd approve of your new frock."

"I don't suppose Mr. Greatson has a thought to spare from his work just now," Miss Brown observed. "He's Abel Deane's private secretary, you know."

"I like young men who work," Frances admitted.

"So do I," Miss Brown assented. "That's one reason I like Mr. Paul. Should you marry him, Frances, if he wanted you to?"

"Why do you ask such foolish questions?" was the somewhat irritated reply. "He has his whole family to support, and I'm afraid he must find it a desperate struggle. His clothes are so well brushed and well pressed, but they're pitifully shabby. He confided to me last time I saw him that he asked at the Cosmopolitan to be allowed to wear a short coat and a black tie as he couldn't afford a clean white one every night."

"Something might happen if you were engaged to him," Miss Brown observed.

"In six years perhaps, or ten," Frances rejoined bitterly. "Of course I know I should be fool enough to say 'yes' if he asked me, and I should be ridiculously happy just at first, but it wouldn't satisfy me for long. You see, I'm not ashamed to confess it, I want to be married. Don't you?"

"I never think about it," Miss Brown admitted. "You see I am very fond indeed of my work. Shall we talk of something else?"

"What else is there interesting for two girls to talk about?" Frances demanded a little brutally. "We might talk about the people at the next table, or whether we're really going to have a revolution, or our latest ideas for a new frock, but we shouldn't be really interested. Men are what make all the difference to us, whether we have them or whether we haven't got them. The nice, modest little people in the world like you, with proper feelings and proper control of them, manage to ignore the whole thing. I wish to the devil I could. If I weren't so sick of the word, I should talk about my temperament. It's likely to lead me into trouble yet."

"I don't think it will," Miss Brown declared with confidence.

"Well, what about Noel Frankland?" Frances enquired defiantly.

Miss Brown shook her head.

"That was before you knew Mr. Paul so well. Besides, although you may have played with the idea, you know perfectly well that any intimacy with a man like that would have been impossible."

"I very nearly let him kiss me once," Frances mused. "I daresay that would have been the end of it though. I wonder what this night club of Paul's is like?"

"He seems rather doubtful about taking us there," Miss Brown observed. "Anyhow we'll go to the cinema first."

Paul came over to wish them good-bye when they paid their bill.

"If you would really care to come later and see what you think of my new show, I would be very glad to take you," he suggested a little doubtfully. "It is not the sort of place to which you could think of going alone. If you did not like it, or if I did not think it well for you to be there, you could come away at once."

"I'm sure we sha'n't want to," Frances declared. "Any sort of place where we can hear some music and get an odd dance will be delightful."

"We are going to a cinema first," Miss Brown told him. "Shall we call here and fetch you afterwards?"

"It would be most agreeable," Paul assented. "Not before eleven o'clock though, if you please. We can take an omnibus, or if it is fine we might walk. It is only in the next street."

The cinema was only moderately amusing. Paul was waiting for them when they returned to the restaurant,

and walked between them towards the club — a protecting figure, his hand frequently respectfully touching Frances' arm as he directed their progress. They paused on the way to study some placards outside a newspaper shop.

MINERS REFUSE GOVERNMENT COMMISSIONS.
RAILWAY UNION MEN STILL IN CONFERENCE.
TRANSPORT WORKERS TO MEET TO-DAY.
STRIKERS REPORTED DRILLING UNDER RED FLAG.

"Supposing everybody strikes," Frances asked, "what would happen to us?"

"It depends entirely," Paul replied, "upon what steps the Government have taken towards meeting such a situation. They keep their own counsel, and very wisely. One hears rumours, of course, but though they say that the country is full of spies, that the Communist Party, for instance, has a regular espionage system, I was told to-day by a well-known railway man that they themselves have no idea what the Government's plans are."

"Why is it so important?" Frances persisted.

"Because," Paul explained, "if the Government has a real system of transport up its sleeve with the Army and Reservists at its back, the railway strike would fail. They could never keep it up long enough, especially with the miners out as well."

"What about the money from abroad?" Miss Brown asked.

"One only knows from rumour, of course," Paul replied, "but they say that the Russians insist upon that being spent in food and on arms — the two adjuncts to a revolution. The Reds have agreed to that; the Trades Unions haven't. Altogether there is a great deal of trou-

ble over that money. Here we are," Paul concluded, coming to a standstill.

They climbed some crazy stairs, for which their escort apologised, and entered a not unpleasing-looking room, with bright decorations and tables arranged round the walls adorned with coloured lamp shades. There was a small orchestra in one corner, an eager little manager, who approved of the appearance of Paul's guests, and insisted upon shaking hands with them, and several competent-looking waiters. They had their choice of tables, and Paul, who after a controversy with Miss Brown, succeeded in being host, ordered a simple supper. Then he rose to his feet.

"Will you dance with me, please," he begged Frances, "before the people come? It would give me great pleasure. Miss Brown will excuse us, I know. She is so good-natured."

So Miss Brown, notwithstanding her new frock, sat alone in a corner for half an hour whilst Paul and Frances, very much to the admiration of the increasing company, danced. When they returned at last to the table, Frances looking unusually animated, Paul gravely offered himself to Miss Brown. Supper, however, was on the table, and a hovering waiter whispered in their ears that they had only twenty minutes in which to drink the bottle of wine upon which Paul had insisted.

"If you have a chance afterwards," Miss Brown said. "You must have your supper first though."

A cheery hour followed. A good many theatrical celebrities came in, some of whom Paul recognised and pointed out. Then his period of respite came to an end. He was sent for to dance and was only able to make occasional visits to their table. During one of these he directed Miss Brown's attention to a little party who had just come in. There was a glitter in his eyes as he watched

them. Malakoff appeared to be in charge, and with him were Bretskopf and Krasset, the third of the Russian envoys. They were accompanied by three elaborately dressed and coiffured but somewhat obvious-looking ladies, and they made a great deal of noise as they took their places.

"That is the way the money of my poor peasants is being spent," Paul said sadly. "Look at the jewels those women are wearing — all new within the last few days. They are habitués of the place and amongst the least welcome."

Miss Brown looked at his darkening face.

"Promise me," she begged ——

"You need have no fear," he interrupted. "I am with you and Miss Austin. The man is safe unless he himself becomes objectionable."

Paul was summoned away and the girls proceeded with their supper in leisurely fashion. Presently all three of the newcomers were dancing. Miss Brown saw Bretskopf recognise Paul and scowl. A little later on, when Paul had found time to visit them again, Bretskopf and the girl, who was sitting arm in arm with him, whispered together. The girl looked across and waved her hand at Paul, who replied stiffly. She whispered to Bretskopf. An evil smile flashed into the latter's face. He sent for a waiter who presently crossed the floor and approached Paul.

"A gentleman there — I think he is a Russian — wants you to dance with his lady friend," he announced.

"You can tell him," Paul replied, "that my time is all engaged this evening."

The waiter hesitated. The message was an unusual one. He returned, however, and delivered it. Bretskopf's scowl deepened, and he beckoned to the manager. They talked together for a moment.

"Why don't you dance with me?" Frances whispered. "You can't be dragged away. I can pose as a client, can't I? You can say that you are taking me on cheaply because our steps match so well."

Paul shook his head.

"Thank you, Miss Austin," he said. "It is very thoughtful of you but this matter must be settled otherwise."

The manager came across to them. He was looking a little perplexed. He addressed Paul in friendly fashion.

"The Russian gentleman there wants you very much to dance with Mademoiselle Lola," he announced. "You have no objection?"

"I am sorry to say that I have," Paul replied. "I will dance with no one who is in the company of that person."

The manager frowned. The tone was new to him.

"Who is the man?" he enquired.

"Bretskopf — the Russian revolutionary. Believe me, Mr. Maturan, I have excellent reasons for my refusal."

"It isn't usual, you know," the manager ventured.

"The circumstances are unusual," Paul pointed out curtly. "The man Bretskopf is a scoundrel and a murderer. I will touch no one who has been in his company."

"They have ordered a very expensive supper," the manager grumbled. "No one spends money like these Russians. However, I will see whether Mademoiselle Lola will be content with Alfred."

He departed on his errand of compromise. Bretskopf's face darkened as he listened to what he had to say. The girl leaned back fanning herself, with an amused smile. She shook her fist playfully over at Paul, who was finishing his supper calmly.

"I hope this won't mean any trouble for you," Miss Brown said.

"I do not wish to lose my job here," Paul acknowledged — "I would sweep the streets if it were necessary to earn money — but there are things which are impossible."

The manager returned. He was obviously a little annoyed and had the air of a man tired of the subject.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to put away your prejudices," he said to Paul. "The gentleman insists. He points out that you are engaged here to dance, which is quite true, and he claims the right to your services. He says that you can double your fee."

For a moment, Miss Brown was afraid. There was a fury in Paul's face which reminded her of the previous occasion when he had spoken of this man. He restrained himself, however, with an effort.

"I am sorry," he said, "nothing will induce me to dance with Mademoiselle Lola whilst she is in her present company."

"It's no good you Russians taking that tone," the other protested, some of the suaveness of his manner already gone. "These fellows have got the pull over there, they've got the money to spend, and you have your living to earn."

Paul said nothing for a moment, but he appeared to be deliberating.

"Come now," the manager enjoined. "Be sensible."

"I was only hesitating," Paul said, "as to whether I should go and repeat the thrashing I gave to that man last time we met. If I were not accompanied by my young lady friends this evening I should certainly do so."

The manager lost his temper.

"It's damned nonsense talking like that," he said. "If you won't dance with Mademoiselle Lola, you dance with no one else here, now or at any other time. Is that understood?"

"Perfectly," Paul replied coldly. "Our engagement

can be considered at an end. I am paying for my supper and I shall dance with my young lady guests. After that I will enter your place no more."

The manager turned away speechless with anger. Frances laid her hand upon Paul's coat sleeve.

"I am very sorry indeed that this should have happened," she said, "but you are quite right. Something else will come along. Life wouldn't be worth living if one had to give in to such detestable people."

He smiled at her gratefully. Her easy tone as well as the tact of her words had an instantaneous effect. The thunder clouds passed from Paul's face. He even smiled.

"It is time," he said, "that I had my dance with Miss Brown."

She hesitated, but his outstretched hand was insistent.

"It is an opportunity," he declared gravely.

So they danced; Miss Brown, who was a shy but graceful performer, very happy. When they resumed their places, Bretskopf's table was again the scene of controversy. They watched with interest the argument which was in progress. The head waiter, apologetic in attitude, was doing his best to soothe his guests. The manager was sent for. Malakoff whispered in his ear, and he obviously hesitated. He glanced round the room. Presently he and the head waiter departed talking earnestly. In less than five minutes two magnums of champagne in pails of ice stood by the side of Bretskopf's table. The place began to take on a livelier aspect; several of the other guests demanded and were served with alcoholic refreshment, chiefly in jugs. Paul shook his head.

"It is no longer my affair," he remarked, "but I do not like this. It is the first week of opening, and the place seemed likely to do well. If this goes on it will not last a month. Mr. Maturan is very foolish. I shall speak to him."

He rose to his feet and accosted the manager, who was just passing their table.

"I think that may lead to great trouble," Paul declared, indicating Bretskopf's table.

The manager shrugged his shoulders.

"It is an exceptional occasion," he declared. "One can scarcely refuse two very distinguished men who are foreigners. Besides, Mr. Malakoff has promised to give a large dinner party here to-morrow night. His doings are always reported in the newspapers. It will be a great advertisement."

Paul shook his head.

"It does not seem to me wise," he said, "to take such a risk when everything is going on so nicely. However, it is not my affair."

"Better let me send you a bottle," the other suggested, "and make up your little difference with Mr. Bretskopf afterwards."

"Thank you," Paul replied coldly. "That would be impossible."

The manager walked off to welcome some newly arrived clients. It was certainly a fact that the atmosphere of the place had become very much gayer since the arrival of the gold-foiled bottles. Conversation grew louder, laughter more frequent, the popping of corks continuous. Every one danced, familiarities increased every moment. In the midst of it all, a small boy in livery rushed into the room from downstairs. Before he could open his mouth, however, he was swung to one side.

A sergeant of police had entered followed by half a dozen plain clothes men. The hubbub died away as though by magic. The sergeant's voice was heard distinctly.

"Stand by the door, Johnson," he ordered. "Don't allow any one to pass out. You come with me, Harrison,

and take down the names and addresses. Where's the manager?"

Mr. Maturan hurried forward, his face pale with apprehension. The usual little crowd tried to slip out quietly, but were turned back. The manager talked impressively but without effect to the sergeant. The latter's expression remained unmoved. He crossed the room towards Bretskopf's table, just as the latter was endeavouring to secrete some of the bottles under the table.

"You will take down the names and addresses of every one here," he ordered his subordinate.

"I claim privilege, Inspector," Bretskopf declared harshly. "I and my two companions are in this country on a political mission."

The sergeant listened respectfully.

"I have heard of your mission, sir," he said. "It is not for me to comment upon it, but I should scarcely think that it is one which would entitle you to any special consideration. However, you will be able to explain to the magistrate in the morning. Take down the names and addresses, Harrison."

There was a further hubbub of expostulation, of which the sergeant took not the slightest notice. As soon as he had completed his tour of the room, he called to the manager.

"I am leaving a man here," he said, "to see that there is no further infringement of the law. Have all the wines and spirits removed at once."

Bretskopf, whom the others had been doing their best to restrain, suddenly left his place and advanced unsteadily across the floor.

"A word with you, Inspector," he demanded. "Will this affair get into the newspapers?"

"Without a doubt, sir. You'll be summoned to appear at Bow Street to-morrow morning."

"But it is an outrage," Bretskopf blustered. "Look here," he went on, pushing the manager to one side, "if it costs me a matter of a hundred pounds my name must not appear — political mission, you understand, and that sort of thing, eh?"

The sergeant looked at him steadfastly. Bretskopf's eyes seemed to grow smaller and smaller, but his colour heightened.

"You're in England not Russia, sir," the representative of the police reminded him sternly. "You can't buy the law here."

"What the devil do you mean?" Bretskopf snarled, swaying a little on his feet.

The sergeant turned away.

"If you'll take my advice, sir," he said, "you'll go back to your table and sit down."

"Who wants your b . . . . y advice?" Bretskopf shouted, aiming a clumsy blow at him.

It was all over in a moment. The sergeant held him firmly by the collar. Two of the plain clothes men had him on either side.

"Let me go!" the captured man screamed. "There'll be trouble about this, I can tell you! Let me go!"

His eyes were blazing. He made wild efforts to free himself.

"Take him to Bow Street," the sergeant ordered.

Malakoff came hurrying up, breathless.

"Look here, Sergeant," he began, "this mustn't go on."

"Mr. Malakoff — I know who you are, sir," the other rejoined — "please don't attempt to interfere with the course of the law. I should advise you to take a taxi round to Bow Street and be there in case the inspector in charge is willing to accept your recognisances for this man's appearance."

The police departed. The orchestra struck up, but

no one seemed inclined to dance. The wine had been removed from all the tables. Bills were being paid and every one was departing. Miss Brown struggled into her new evening coat with a little smile upon her face. She understood now the meaning of a telephone message which in very guarded terms she had transmitted that afternoon to X. Y. O., Scotland Yard.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"So you frequent night clubs, do you, Miss Brown?" Dessiter enquired suddenly, turning around from his desk after a somewhat curt good morning.

"I've never visited one before," was the apologetic reply.

"Hope you enjoyed it," he grunted. "I see your name was taken — address, Shepherd's Market."

"Ought I to have given a wrong address? I'm sorry. I've had no experience."

"It's just as well that whilst you're engaged upon this sort of work your name is out of the newspapers as much as possible. However, you were with my dear young friend, I see, which counts for something."

"He had an engagement there, as dancer," Miss Brown confided. "It was he who invited my friend and me."

"The matter of your presence there is of no particular consequence," Dessiter said, aware of a suspicious dimness in Miss Brown's blue eyes. "The nuisance is that I could have given you a tip to stay away if I had known about it."

"I wonder," Miss Brown mused, "how you got Bretskopf there?"

Dessiter finished the letter which he had been writing, rose to his feet and strolled across the room. He sat on the corner of Miss Brown's table — an attitude which was becoming a habit of his.

"Are you insinuating that X. Y. O. had anything to do with this raid?"

"I think that you planned it," Miss Brown replied. "You see I sent that telephone message to Scotland Yard."

Dessiter nodded gravely.

"I had forgotten that," he admitted. "As for getting Bretskopf there, it was a chance of course. We sent cards of invitation in the manager's name, and Mademoiselle Lola earned fifty pounds by insisting upon wine. We scarcely dared hope for the brawl though. That was an amazing stroke of luck. By the bye, wasn't there some trouble between Bretskopf and Paul?"

Miss Brown nodded.

"Bretskopf tried to engage Mr. Paul to dance with his young lady friend," she confided. "I think he did it with the idea of humiliating him. Mr. Paul refused and the manager dismissed him."

Dessiter frowned.

"Quite right, too," he pronounced. "The most difficult lad in the world, that, Miss Brown. I was indebted before the war to his people for a great deal of hospitality and kindness, but do you think that they will accept help from me now? Not one penny. I've offered it in the most delicate manner I can think of time after time. All that I can get out of your young friend is that he'll come to me if he's really hard up against it. Does he want to marry either of you two?"

Miss Brown was surprised at the sudden searching gaze he bent upon her. She felt her eyes caught and held, realised as she had done before the impossibility of telling a lie to this man.

"My friend and he get on very well," she said. "I believe Mr. Paul is very fond of her. I think she is fond of him, but then they haven't seen a great deal of one another yet."

Dessiter had the air of a man who has discovered all that he wanted to know. He went back to his desk, lit a cigarette and began a lazy perambulation of the room. A messenger arrived with some reports — two from the War

Office and one from Scotland Yard. He glanced them through, initialled them and handed them to Miss Brown to file. Then he resumed his attitude of ease upon her table.

"A vein of weakness in this, I suppose," he began slowly, "of advancing age and ineptitude. Lately, Miss Brown, for the first time in my life, I have felt, I will not say the need of, but the desire for a confidant. Accidentally you know already more than any one else of the internal affairs here, except our X. Y. O. friend at Scotland Yard and Nicholson at the War Office. Some of these affairs we are engaged upon may seem to you a little trivial. I will tell you the great object of all our work now and for the last week. We want to detach the respectable portion of the English Labour Party as far as possible from foreign influence. Last night's incident was only one of several. At every opportunity we are doing our best to discredit these fellows. There is nothing puts up the back of the working man more than to have it proved to him that those who are supposed to be his leaders and friends are playing the fool in serious times, like Bretskopf last night. I hear, by the bye, that Bretskopf, or the leader of what they call the Action Committee of the Communists, has offered secretly ten thousand pounds for distribution amongst the press to make as light as possible of last night's business."

"That won't make any difference?" Miss Brown asked anxiously.

Dessiter smiled.

"What do you think? This is England not Russia. There's no influence in the world except ours, issued from this room, and endorsed by the Minister below, can change the tone of a single paragraph in any paper. To-night Bretskopf's episode will appear in great headlines."

"Supposing you succeed," Miss Brown asked — "sup-

posing these Russian envoys are discredited — do you think that the Labour trouble will pass over?"

"I do," Dessiter assured her. "I have come to the conclusion — and to-day I think I know more about it than any other man alive — that with all the blood and thunder talk in the parks, and these so-called Red Flag Meetings throughout the whole country, despite these frothy-mouthed Communist Leaders, who apparently control the Unions, there is no real revolutionary spirit in this country. It may interest you to know that all our reports from the military centres which we had brought up to date after that little affair down at Camberley, are excellent. I personally believe that the Army is as sound as a bell, and that all Thornton's propaganda was wasted. If, at the end of the next few weeks, during the progress of the strikes or afterwards, any attempt were made half-heartedly or otherwise at a revolution, it would fail miserably. Labour might try to starve us — you know very well that we've taken steps to provide against that. They might try to arm themselves — well, there's a little disappointment for them in that direction, which you also know about. And yet all this," he went on, his tone a little more earnest, "is only patching up the sores. Something more is needed — something greater. I'm not wholly on the side of the capitalists, Miss Brown. There's a lot to be said for those underneath, and so long as we don't recognise that there is a grievance there will always be this trouble, there will always be these damned foreign rascals flooding the country with money and whetting the people's discontent. We want to strike at the root of the whole thing. We've the worst government in power on God's earth. They've made every possible blunder. We're losing our trade, we've lost our position in the money markets of the world, we are slipping back as far as we can towards a place amongst the second class nations, but there's one

man there with imagination, one man who has the right idea. If he has the courage to defy the rest of them, to go to the country on it, and if he wins, as he will win, chooses a Cabinet whom he can rule, not consult, we may have a chance to muddle through after all. It will take us a generation to get over this era of bad government, but it can be done."

The private telephone rang. Miss Brown received a cryptic message and passed the receiver to her Chief.

"From Downing Street," she announced.

Dessiter listened for a moment and spoke almost in monosyllables. Then he replaced the receiver. There was a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"Miss Brown," he said, "you understand, I know, after our conversation, that I have every confidence in you — every confidence and a great deal of interest."

"I am very proud to think so, Colonel Dessiter," Miss Brown admitted.

"I want you now, therefore," he went on kindly, "not to be hurt but to put on your hat and coat — very nice new hat and coat by the bye — and hurry out. Go anywhere you like for an hour, and if you meet any one whom you recognise on the way here, forget them."

Miss Brown struggled into her coat after a regretful glance towards her typewriter.

"There's a great deal of work to be done," she observed.

"Plenty of time later on," Dessiter assured her. "One hour, mind. Why not go for a walk? You look a little pale."

Miss Brown took her leave and descended the stairs towards the lift, very demure, very quiet and unobtrusive. As she reached it, however, with her finger upon the bell, it swung up into its place and she was conscious of three men stepping out. She stood on one side, dropping her

eyes at once as she noticed their curious glances. She recognised all three and went on her way with a little smile of reflected glory.

Miss Brown walked upon the Embankment, watched the sea-gulls hovering over the grey water, and scavenging in the gutters by her side for food. No rain was falling but the air was damp and cold and there were signs of fog over the City. After a brief progress eastwards she turned back and walked the other way, passed Scotland Yard, looked up towards Downing Street, and paused for some time to gaze at the Houses of Parliament. The inner forces of life to which one pays no attention in one's day by day existence, and which Miss Brown studiously ignored, seemed suddenly wonderful things. There was a branch of X. Y. O. in one of the rooms of that great building to her right. She envisaged it all. She herself was developing a miniature replica: files of reports from every one of the great industrial centres, the names of the possible strike leaders, cuttings of speeches from the local papers, an account of the men themselves, their real aims and characters. There was a list on the other side too — a black list of employers, a growing compendium of information which no one had ever troubled to collect before. Then there was the foreign branch with its phantasmagoria of unending detail punctuated by blood-curdling, coldly dramatic records of unbelievable happenings. With a human little thrill, so strangely out of accord with the grey mistiness of her surroundings, she remembered those passionate hours when she had sat at the table and taken down into quaint and secret symbols the story of what might have been Dessiter's dying revelations. There was the sketch of Malakoff — how well she remembered it — Malakoff, stripped naked, the man, his cunning viciousness, his sinister malignity. There was the analysis of Bretskopf too — not pleasant reading. Some of it had

been broadcasted within the last few days — far-seeing preparation for what was to come. There was the story of China — a closed chapter now — the story of the moment when the whole ferment of black fury and evil intent had been focussed from that crime-drenched city in Russia upon England; stories of secret shipments of arms, of great stores of food bought in different capitals, shipped in different manners, to different warehouses, cases of inflammatory pamphlets to be translated, copied and duplicated until they lay like poisonous but phantom fungi upon the land. And behind all these revelations the figure of the man who had defied the secret services of the world and passed from capital to capital with an ever increasing price upon his head, a man unrecognised amongst the great leaders of the cause for which he toiled, but a man whose name spelt terror to those who welded their thunderbolts in the caverns of the underneath world and who were a menace to law and order.

Miss Brown bought a newspaper, and, notwithstanding the cold, sat down upon the edge of a moisture-beaded seat whilst she read the leading article in the most sedate of the evening publications — an article obviously inspired, destined to pave the way towards a proper comprehension of what was to be the greatest political upheaval of the century. The Government which had utterly failed was already humbly recognising its own inefficiency. Out of its ashes though there were great possibilities. The resignation of almost every member of the Cabinet was openly hinted at. There were three names only which remained — a triumvirate of common sense. There were men whose passing the country must regret, but the country to-day had need of new methods, new blood, new inspiration. A boy came hurrying by with a later edition. Miss Brown set down her more dignified periodical and bought one. She first scanned the great black headlines:

RAID IN WEST END NIGHT CLUB

Serge Malakoff, Bretskopf and Krasset, Soviet envoys to British Labour, fined for drinking with women after hours.

Miss Brown, after her return to Whitehall, found the conference over and Dessiter himself absent. The pile of work by the side of her desk, however, had increased amazingly, and she started at once. With a keen sensation of pleasure she realised as she glanced through some of the letters to which she was to reply how completely she was trusted. At one o'clock Mergen appeared from somewhere in those mysterious premises beyond and brought her luncheon upon a tray.

"Colonel Dessiter thought you probably wouldn't go out, madam," he said. "So we've done the best we could for you."

With an omelette, some cold meat, rolls and butter, some baked apples and half a bottle of claret, as compared with the bun and cup of coffee which Miss Brown had been contemplating, she found herself accepting the situation with equanimity.

"Do you know at what time Colonel Dessiter is expected back?" she enquired.

"He was not able to say himself, madam," the man replied.

Miss Brown lunched moderately and with discretion, yet with a healthy appetite. When she had finished, she recommenced her work. She was disturbed by neither visitors nor telephone calls. Towards five o'clock Mergen brought her in some tea and a plate of hot toast, at neither of which she glanced. He lingered for a moment.

"If you will pardon the liberty, madam," he ventured, "your typewriter has been going since half-past one, and

it is now five o'clock. Might I suggest that you have your tea over here by the fire and rest for a time? "

Miss Brown was suddenly aware that she was tired, physically weary, yet mentally stimulated by the continual reminders in her work of this amazing world into which she had plunged. She accepted Mergen's suggestion with a little gesture of relief, sipped her tea and munched her toast, curled up in an easy-chair near the fire. A pleasant and most insidious drowsiness possessed her. There was something which seemed like a mist before her eyes, a pleasant gliding away of the senses — rest. She sat up with a start. She was conscious of the queerest, most unfamiliar sensation in the world, her heart was beating fast, the blood racing through her veins as though to some strange sort of music. A few feet away from her, in the darkened room, standing before the fire with his hands behind his back, was Dessiter.

" Heavens, have I been asleep? " Miss Brown exclaimed, terrified.

" It would appear so," was the noncommittal reply.

Again there was that surge of strange feeling. She was puzzled, half contrite, half bewildered.

" How long have you been here? " she asked, rising.

" Some five or ten minutes."

" I am really very sorry," she confessed. " I worked without stopping all the afternoon, and I thought I'd have my tea by the fire. I never sleep in the daytime. I can't think what happened to me."

" In any case," he said, " you have done a very excellent day's work already. I have been looking through some of it. I congratulate you. Your typing is singularly clear. I fail to find a single error. Your letters, too, express exactly what I intended to convey."

Miss Brown turned on the light and looked across at him gratefully.

"It is very pleasant to hear you say so."

"As a matter of fact," he observed, making his way towards the inevitable cigarette box, "I can't think how I managed before you came. They used to send me up special young men from one of the departments, but none of my work was ever done so quickly or so well."

Miss Brown felt extraordinarily light-hearted. Apart from the joy of his praise, there was something else — a little singing still in the blood, a quivering of the senses for which she could not account. The wildest ideas found their furtive way into her mind. She had had a dream — of course it had been a dream. She glanced up and looked half enquiringly across the room. Dessiter had resumed his place upon the hearthrug, and their eyes met. His long, oval face seemed to gleam whiter than ever through the shadows, but his eyes had lost their steely expression. Suddenly he nodded thoughtfully as though in reply to Miss Brown's unspoken question.

"Yes, I did," he confessed. "I hope you're not angry."

CHAPTER XXIX

A JOURNALIST loitering about Downing Street in search of copy described the exodus of the various members of the Cabinet Council from Number 10 a few days later as the "half terrified, half stupefied exit of a flock of sheep with their dreaded yet revered canine protector at their heels." Certainly, though neither novelist nor journalist has ever presumed to attempt to disclose what may have taken place at a Cabinet Council, the events which immediately followed it clearly indicated the fact that it had been of a startling nature. Most of the little company made their hesitating way towards Westminster. The Prime Minister, attended by a faithful subordinate, stepped into a taxicab and demanded to be driven to the Carlton. Safely ensconced in the smoking room, the former ordered a whisky and soda, filled his pipe and leaned back in his easy-chair. The world would have loved to have heard broadcasted the first words of the Premier after the astounding events of the afternoon. Only the waiter who brought the whisky and soda, and his companion, seated in the opposite easy-chair, were privileged to hear them.

"Well, I'm damned!"

His subordinate — himself a Cabinet Minister of high rank, and unaddicted to the use of strong language — stretched himself out in his chair and looked helplessly up at the ceiling. His expression was still that of a man stricken dumb by the unexpected.

"What do you make of it all?" the Prime Minister demanded.

His companion glanced round the room.

"At first I thought it was a bluff," he declared. "I am not sure that I don't think so now. In any case it was the most outrageous attack upon a statesman of established reputation which I have ever heard from a young man attending almost his first Cabinet Council Meeting."

The Prime Minister sighed.

"I hate that phrase — 'judgment by results,'" he admitted. "Taking our policies for the last few years step by step, I still fail to see how we could have done other than we did, except perhaps in that one instance of financial import upon which he laid special stress. And yet on judgment by results we make a poor showing. It's been creeping in upon me for weeks that there's something vitally wrong about our principles. Flanders won't hear of any further attempts at economy. Our friend over the way won't listen to any cutting down of the Mesopotamian expenses. There doesn't seem to me to be a way anywhere, next year or the year after, of getting even sixpence off the income tax."

"And in the meanwhile," his companion muttered — "Marabels was right in that, at any rate — there were thirty thousand more unemployed last week."

"After all, these are generalities," the Prime Minister declared. "Marabels has thrown down a bombshell and no mistake. We are face to face with the worst industrial crisis in history. The miners for some reason or other won't even send their leaders to meet me. They seem absolutely confident, so do the railway men, although they haven't shown their hand. And in the face of this comes Marabels' ultimatum."

"His ultimatum is all very well," the other remarked, "but we still have our majority in the House of Commons."

"That isn't the point. Do you believe that we still have it in the country? Of course we haven't. We're a

well-meaning lot of duffers, Henry — that's what we've proved ourselves to be. We went in with the biggest majority of modern times, cocksure of ourselves, with our minds made up beforehand that everything we did must turn out for the best. We may put a bold face on it, but the fact remains, that the things we thought for the best have turned out for the worst. Marabels has got us in the hell of a corner. If we go to the country now the whole world will call shame on us. We shouldn't be allowed to go. There wouldn't be time to get the elections over before the storm had burst. It would be playing the game of Frankland and Deane and all the lot of them. Yet we've got to do something. We're pilloried by the press, and every minute these revolutionaries are gaining adherents through our misfortunes."

"What exactly are Marabels' demands?"

"Demands such as have never before been made to any Prime Minister of an established government," he said. "He demands the immediate resignation of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Masters and yourself. He demands the inclusion in the Cabinet of Rothwell, Sidney Herd and Osborne. Further he demands that the Cabinet Ministers who remain shall pledge themselves to such course of action as he may dictate."

"In other words he is to be Prime Minister," the other remarked.

"Precisely, only he realises the fact that there can be no General Election just now. He wants to govern through me without it. The Mussolini trick, perhaps. I am to wear the sheep's head and he's to do the roaring."

"I can't make anything of his policy."

"The fellow's a third a Socialist, a third a Communist, and a third a damned shrewd statesman. He has what I should call communistic theories toned down to attune with existing facts."

"When are you going to see him again?"

"At my house at midnight," the Prime Minister replied, with a grimace. "He insists upon it that no other Minister is present. The only person he wants to bring with him is Glyde, head of our new department at the Home Office, which, by the bye, was his idea."

There was a brief silence. The Prime Minister's companion was a man who had faced failure before, but who had also tasted the sweets of success. He had sufficient common sense, however, to see that in view of the condition of the country at the moment there was little possibility of his continuing to enjoy the more pleasurable of the two sensations.

"I don't know what you'll decide, of course, sir," he said, "but so far as I am concerned my resignation is at your disposal. Frankly, I don't see how we've drifted into such an *impasse*, but we have given these devils plenty of pegs to hang their Red Flag upon. Individually I think we've all done our best, and yet we've been a government of muddlers. I shan't be sorry to have finished with politics for a time."

"Nor I for ever," the Prime Minister grunted. "The fact of it is, it's a job that needs more than the ordinary intelligence of a lawyer or a business man. One wants genius. Disraeli, Gladstone and Pitt had it — I honestly believe Marabels has a spark of it — I damned well know I haven't. I've struggled along, thought every now and then I'd done decently, and this is the end of it. I'm going to be the mouthpiece of this young man's decisions until the country quiets down. Then we're going to the polls, and God help us! You'll stand again?"

"To save my face," the other replied. "I've got to tell my constituency I've done my best for them. I shall take their verdict and go into hiding with it."

The Prime Minister's private secretary entered.

"What am I to say to the journalists, sir?" he enquired.

"I'll see them all at seven o'clock to-morrow morning," his Chief declared. "Not before. Clear them off, if you can. Get me a taxi and come home with me. I've a conference at midnight."

At eleven o'clock that night, Miss Brown was comfortably tucked up in bed, her curtains discreetly drawn, but her window a few inches open, the clothes which she had discarded neatly folded up on one chair, the clothes which she proposed to wear in the morning similarly arranged upon another. There were three pennies counted out ready for her bath in the morning on the corner of the mantelpiece, the kettle filled standing by the side of the stove. Miss Brown was peacefully sleeping when she was awakened by the sound of a motor car stopping outside, and the shrill summons of the electric bell. She sat up in bed, remembered her night dress — one of her recent purchases, which she had secretly considered immodestly transparent and décolletée — and sliding out of bed, hurried into a dressing gown. She opened the door upon the chain and peered out. It was Mergen who stood there, his hat in his hand, his manner apologetic.

"Very sorry, Miss Brown," he announced, "but the Chief wants you at Whitehall at once. He wants you to go with him to a conference."

"You will have to give me ten minutes," Miss Brown decided calmly.

"That will do very nicely, Miss."

Miss Brown hurried back to her room, and in very little more than the ten minutes she had prescribed was out again and seated in the car. It was barely twenty minutes to twelve when she presented herself at headquarters. Dessiter was lounging in his chair by the fire; opposite

him was a man whose appearance was vaguely familiar to her — a tall, sturdy man of fair complexion, clean-shaven, with features which seemed carved out of granite.

"This is my secretary, Miss Brown," Dessiter announced. "You know Mr. Marabels by sight, I daresay. We have a conference in Downing Street, Miss Brown, and I want you to bring with you certain papers. I will give you the outlines and you can look them out for yourself."

Miss Brown followed her Chief across to the safe. He tapped the files which were hanging there, one by one, and explained his needs. Then he left her to the task of filling a small despatch box with various documents, and returned to his chair.

"I needn't ask you," Marabels said, "whether the young woman is to be trusted."

"Implicitly," was the confident reply.

"I will take your word for it. You're a judge of men and women if ever there was one."

"I ought to be. I've had to back my judgment with my life plenty of times. I'd do so again in the case of Miss Brown."

Miss Brown, who was just within hearing, paused in her task behind the wide-open safe doors, to revel in the subtle glow of pleasure which crept through her veins. Marabels nodded.

"I'm content," he said. "Of course you know political tactics and military tactics have this much in common — the surprise blow is the great thing. We want to get this in and knock the wind out of Frankland's sails and bring Abel Deane to reason. The Premier doesn't realise how near he is to trouble."

"He'll know after to-night — after what we can show him," Dessiter observed. "Finished, Miss Brown?"

"Quite finished, sir."

Dessiter rose to his feet, drank his whisky and soda and threw the remains of his cigarette into the fire.

"To make history then!" he exclaimed. "Come along, Marabels. Let me carry the despatch case for you, Miss Brown."

At Downing Street they found the Prime Minister with his secretary awaiting them in a small room at the back of the house free from any atmosphere of officialdom. He looked askance at Miss Brown, but Dessiter quickly explained.

"You will understand, sir," he said, "that in my position I am bound to trust some one. I have selected Miss Brown who did wonderful service for me at a time when I scarcely knew whether I was going to live or die, and to whose efforts are due the fact that I was able to preserve the records of my work without having them fall into the hands of the other side."

The Prime Minister bowed kindly. He used almost the same words as Marabels.

"One would never presume to doubt your judgment, Colonel Dessiter, as to the trustworthiness of either man or woman."

"My position here is almost that of an onlooker," Marabels began. "I told you, sir, that if you would give me an interview to-night with Colonel Dessiter I would prove to you how infinitely more serious things are in the country than you believe. The information which Colonel Dessiter is about to place before you was some of it gathered by him personally at a time when he was acting half officially and half unofficially, and the remainder has been acquired since the institution of X. Y. O. and its affiliated organisations — a very admirable stroke of policy," he added, "but a little overdue."

"I am ready to hear anything Colonel Dessiter may have to disclose," the Premier declared.

Miss Brown opened her despatch box. Dessiter motioned her to a chair by his side.

"I will now try to lay before you briefly, sir," he said, "the exact situation. The only thing that I do not know is how far the Socialist Party as represented by Macpherson and the Congress of Trades Unions are prepared to support the extremists, but I can prove to you that the strength of the extremists themselves is far greater than the country suspects, their organisation far more complete and their programme more devastating. The documents tabulated as 'I. B.', if you please, Miss Brown."

For three quarters of an hour Dessiter, in an even, undemonstrative tone, laid his evidence upon the table and expounded from it the vast underground conspiracy which during the last four years had been cunningly and skilfully conducted. He produced his proofs often without a word of comment. Figures he either guaranteed or admitted that they were estimates. When he had finished, the Premier's face was unusually haggard. He sat for a moment in a characteristic attitude, his hands flat upon the table in front of him, a frown upon his forehead.

"You have made out a damning case, Colonel Dessiter," he said gravely, "but why have you kept these facts so much to yourself? Why have we not heard from you before?"

"Because," Dessiter replied, "it is almost impossible to break through the officialdom of certain members of your Cabinet, sir. I, who had information of a vital character, was obliged to wait once four days before I could obtain an interview with a certain Minister. He was, I believe, shooting in the country. When he returned, it was too late for the action which I desired to take."

"You yourself, sir," Marabels intervened, a little brutally, "have treated the individual matters brought before you in connection with this affair with a certain light-

ness. I am responsible for having advised Colonel Dessiter to complete his evidence both as regards the malignity of the foreign influence which has permeated throughout every one of our great labour centres, and the infamous alliance which without a doubt exists between these damned foreigners and certain of our politicians. You've got the proof there — definite, unassailable facts. We have something to deal with here which must be dealt with powerfully, promptly and inflexibly. That is why I was compelled to take up the attitude I did this afternoon. I made statements then which you characterised as amazing. I told you that I would produce definite proof within twenty-four hours, and I have done so."

The Premier stretched out his hand for his faithful companion — a small and blackened briar pipe. He filled it with tobacco and lit it with shaking fingers. He seemed to have aged during the last half hour.

"I am quite prepared to admit the gravity of the situation," he declared, "but what precisely do you want me to do?"

"I want you to take a very unusual course, sir," Marabels replied. "It won't appeal to you — you'll probably dislike it intensely, but in my considered opinion it's the only chance we've got of saving the country from disaster. I cannot take Colonel Dessiter's information into Parliament, attack you from there and send you to the country. Even if I succeeded in turning you out, the fat would be in the fire, and, whilst we studied our election addresses, the storm would have burst. This is the only way. You must act as though you were out of office, and you must give your support to my scheme. You'll have a lot of trouble from your own side, of course, but you've got the votes, and you can do it."

"But what precisely is your scheme?" the Prime Minister asked.

"I am going to take the bull by the horns. I am going to anticipate what sane Labour, as represented by Abel Deane and his men, is on the point of demanding, and give it to them before they ask for it. I am going to bring it forward as a government proposal and you, sir, are going to support it: that every labour-employing industry in this country shall be subjected to a rigid scrutiny as regards the profits produced, the share which is being added to capital and spent by the capitalists, and the share which is expended in wages. In other words I am proposing a commission for every industry, instead of just the mines, consisting of members nominated by the Trades Unions, the employers and the work-people. They will come to no decisions themselves. They will draw up a report which will be submitted to me. If there is any dispute as regards the presentation of the facts I shall investigate the matter myself. Upon the agreed figures, when the position has been made clear, I and my helpers will work out a new scale of wages. We are going to free every industry of injustice, give Labour its fair show, and do it all, not with Red Flags waving and bonfires burning, but in our own departments of Whitehall as an act of justice from one portion of the nation to the other."

"You're out to strip the capitalist," the Prime Minister remarked.

"Not at all," Marabels rejoined. "We are going to use common sense in the redistribution of profits. Labour has a right to a certain percentage of them as labour. The capitalist has a right to a certain percentage of them from the fact that his brains and money have been the foundation of the business. He'll still get plenty, but his managers will get a leg up, and the rank and file of the labour he employs will be put in a more dignified position. I'll give you one instance that I can think of. It is a weaver's business — not a large one. The net profits

last year were twenty-two thousand pounds, all taken by the owner, who is the son of the man who founded the business, and who has a villa in Monte Carlo, where he spends most of his time. His manager draws eight hundred a year, foremen of the departments get about six pounds a week, the rank and file average something like three pounds fifteen to four pounds. The way I should work the thing out — and I've worked it out as a specimen — the owner would get eight thousand pounds a year, the manager fifteen hundred a year, the foremen twelve pounds a week, and the operatives six. There's nothing revolutionary in that, is there? And yet I tell you for the amount our Monte Carlo young spark has to sacrifice — and he'll still have eight thousand a year — two hundred and seventeen men will live in greater dignity and greater comfort. There will be at least ninety-two commissions," Marabels went on, "a Ministry of Commissions, a Court of Jurisdiction, and myself behind it all. I don't believe in commissions, you see, except to break up the ground. I believe in the judgment of one sane man who hears the arguments of both sides."

"Do you imagine that you can pass this through the House of Commons?" the Premier asked wonderingly.

"With your help, yes," was the cool reply. "And you'll give your help all right. You'll be an enthusiast on the scheme before it's all over. You'll go to the country more or less of a hero, but I warn you I'm going to be the next Prime Minister. This country, since the war, has been governed by a nurseryful of nincompoops. We've lost our position financially and economically, and our prestige. Our misfortunes have been America's opportunity. She has taken our place as the leading financial power, she has helped herself to our trade, and she is rapidly becoming the dominant influence in the world. I am going to see that we catch her up."

The Prime Minister rose to his feet.

"We have gone as far as we can with this discussion at present, I think," he announced. "I accept your terms so far as they go, Mr. Marabels. I will support your scheme, although I hope you realise that it is more even than the Socialists themselves have ever ventured to ask for. I will stand on one side and see what you can do under conditions where I admit the present Government has failed, but I reserve the right at any time I find myself hopelessly in conflict with you, to resign."

"You can go to the country the moment we've dealt with this communistic plot," Marabels declared coldly. "I with the adherents I shall have gained will fight the disciples of the old political school — Liberals or Conservatives, or whatever they like to call themselves — on any platform in England, and we shall win."

Miss Brown and Dessiter found themselves under a clear and starlit sky as they left Downing Street and entered the car. There was a touch of frost in the air. A late newspaper boy was still shouting the news. More strikes were threatened, the railwaymen seemed inspired with a new spirit of defiance, the leaders of the transport workers were still in congress.

"You can drop me at Whitehall," Dessiter said. "I'll take your papers up."

"What do you think of Mr. Marabels?" Miss Brown ventured to ask.

Dessiter smiled.

"What I have always thought," he replied. "He has a wonderful gift of reticence, but he has been saving all this up for the crucial moment. I should say that to-day he is the only man living who could give this country a chance of getting on her legs again."

"A Mussolini," Miss Brown murmured.

"Of his type without a doubt," Dessiter acquiesced.

CHAPTER XXX

Marabels' speech in the House of Commons, delivered without any attempt at eloquence, or without any of the orator's tricks for arresting attention, held the House spellbound for two hours, and made history for all time. There had been rumours for days, even weeks, that the Government had something sensational up its sleeve, and that there was going to be one huge, almost cataclysmic effort on its part to cope with the great upheaval of labour which had seemed every day to grow more threatening. Marabels' proposals were simply a detailed exposition of the scheme which he had laid before the Prime Minister some nights before, but the secret had been well-kept, and the amazing breadth and scope of the suggestions took every one by surprise. The other side of the house frankly professed themselves unable to discuss changes of so drastic a nature without careful consideration. Such debate as followed was spasmodic and unrepresentative. Pennington was the only one of the recognised Communistic Party who rose to his feet, and the utmost he could do was to attack the proposals on the somewhat illogical ground of their being a gift to a community which had already made up its mind to take what belonged to it by force. His speech met with but a feeble response even from his own party. The adjournment brought Members hurrying together in little groups. Secretaries of the various party leaders rushed hither and thither full of affairs. From the Strangers' Gallery, Malakoff and Bretskopf scowled down upon the scene.

"Nothing like it since the days of Oliver Cromwell!" one excited Member declared in the Lobby.

"I always knew," a Cabinet Minister remarked thought-

fully, "that Marabels had something forming in his mind. He's one of our intellectuals, and yet for months he's been one of the most silent men in the House."

"He must have a sense of drama," another Member observed. "He waited his time, and he chose it with psychological exactitude."

Marabels, who had slipped away from the House unnoticed, walked along the Embankment through a little storm of windy rain, and reached the Adelphi without having spoken to a soul. He let himself in to one of the row of grey stone houses and mounted to his rooms upon the first floor. The apartment, which was evidently his sitting room, was furnished simply, almost severely. The walls were so lined with books that there was no room for pictures. The furniture was Georgian and heavy. There were no flowers, photographs, nor indications anywhere of feminine influence. A bright fire was burning in the grate, however, and a tray with whisky and soda stood upon the corner of a table littered with books and pamphlets. Marabels took off his coat, found a pipe in a smokers' cabinet, filled it with tobacco and lit it. Then he mixed himself a drink and sat down in his shirt sleeves. There was not a trace of exaltation in his manner, nothing to denote the fact that he had passed through a great ordeal successfully. In his mind he went over his speech. So far as he could remember he had not missed a single point. Presently he rang the bell. A young man entered with some papers in his hand — Marabels' secretary.

"Still at work, Hugh?"

"I've just finished, sir," was the quiet reply. "How did it go?"

Marabels smiled grimly.

"All right, I think. I missed nothing, but it was the queerest audience in the world. They sat with their mouths open, most of the time. No one wanted what I

was offering, except perhaps Abel Deane, Macpherson and the respectable side of Labour. Our own party were stupefied even though they had had a hint of what was coming; the extremists amongst the Communists, who are out to fight, were seeing the ground knocked from under their feet, and they didn't like it. They all seemed to realise one thing though: I wasn't speaking to the House of Commons at all — I was speaking through them to the country."

A telephone rang in the next room. The young man went away to answer it.

"The Prime Minister is on his way down to see you, sir," he announced, on his return.

For a moment Marabels' face darkened.

"If that means he's backing out," he muttered, "it will be the end of our present constitution. He'll be asking for what the country will certainly get. There's no one up, Hugh. You'd better stay and let him in. Go to bed afterwards."

The front door bell rang a few minutes later. The young man descended, and presently reappeared ushering in the Prime Minister. The latter had the flushed cheeks and bright eyes of one who had been engaged in vigorous argument for the last half hour — which was indeed the case. Marabels rose to his feet.

"This is very kind of you, sir," he said. "I would have come to you if you'd sent for me."

"I preferred it this way," was the urbane reply. "Marabels, I congratulate you. I have never heard a clearer exposition of such a revolutionary proposal. You stupefied the House to-night, although there wasn't a word of yours which lent itself to misinterpretation. I think you have also stupefied the journalists," the Premier went on, a humorous smile parting his lips. "I can imagine them as they are sitting at present, scores of them, strug-

gling with their headlines. I suppose you realise that it is the first time in history that any direct appeal of a vital nature has been made to the country without the press having been let into the secret."

"If the press knew as much as you and I know, thanks to Dessiter, of what we're trying to save the country from," Marabels observed, "they would wield their pens perhaps a little differently. As it is, I am not afraid. The thing that is best prevails. My scheme is the only one that can save the country, and I don't want it edited even by the giants of Fleet Street. It will survive and meet with acceptance automatically."

"You are full of confidence," the Premier remarked.

"Confidence is half the battle," Marabels rejoined, "but it must be confidence, not braggadocio. It must be confidence in what one sees and knows to be the truth. We are fortunate because the titular head of the Communist Party is like the leader of the Socialists — a man of strong common sense. If things had gone on, he'd have been carried off his feet in time and swamped by the Reds. To-day he's our man."

"You have spoken to him?"

"I don't need to. Logically and inevitably he is our man. Macpherson is for us. Frankland and his lot will be hysterical, but they will be out-voted a hundred to one. You are opening the debate yourself to-morrow, sir?"

"I am."

"If I might make the suggestion," Marabels ventured, "forget all that we have learnt from Dessiter. Drop the alarmist note entirely. Ours is the initiative, not the defensive. The classes have been drawn too far apart. It is our policy to bring them closer together for the good of our suffering industries, for the good of the Empire."

The Premier nodded.

"I'll remember, Marabels."

"I hope, sir," the latter went on, with a vague note of apology in his tone, "that you won't think of me only as the cuckoo in the nest. I entered the Cabinet for no personal reasons whatever. I saw what was coming to the country, and I knew that the present policy of drifting would have to end, or we should cease to exist."

"As a politician," the Premier confessed, "I have plenty of faults, but I am not an egoist, neither am I personally ambitious. I have done my best, under very difficult conditions, but I am quite content to give way to the new ideas if the new ideas will benefit the country where I have failed. I have to tell you, by the bye, that Flanders has consented to hand in his resignation."

Marabels nodded shortly.

"That was inevitable," he declared. "Flanders has been the worst failure in the whole Cabinet. At the same time, in judging him one must remember that for some reason or other he seems to have felt himself called upon to follow in the footsteps of a long line of predecessors."

"I know you as a legislator," the Prime Minister remarked, filling his pipe from the tobacco jar which the other had pushed across, "but I know nothing of you as a financier."

"I don't know much of the technique of the job," Marabels admitted. "I'm a carpet manufacturer, as I daresay you have heard, but I've got a cashier down in Kidminster whom I'd back to make a better Chancellor of the Exchequer than Flanders."

The Premier smiled.

"A little severe," he observed.

"I don't think so. These fellows are all working on theories, not facts. There should be very little difference in the principles which govern the finances of a nation and the finances of a private trading firm like mine. We extend when we can afford it — not before. We buy new

machinery, buy other branches, when we have made the money for them, or see the money in view — not before. Broadly speaking, my idea of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's job is to write down a credit side first, and then sanction expenditure to balance income, and not a penny more. You fellows have been working the other way about. What's the result? The balance that's been left against you, you've had to heap on the shoulders of the people in the shape of the most damnable, the most iniquitous income tax any government has ever imposed upon a nation of idiots."

"How else were we to get the money?" the Premier demanded.

"Get the money for what?" Marabels rejoined. "Drop the things you wanted the money for, if you haven't got it to spend. My God, the millions you people have wasted! Your Civil Service — any one of the chiefs of the great department stores could show you how to cut that down twenty-five per cent in a month. Your Navy estimates — ships are all very well when you can afford them; when you can't, you must do without. Your foreign enterprises — how much of that money which is crippling British industry to-day in the shape of income tax have you chucked away abroad? More than you'd like to confess, I think. The income tax is a good enough tax, but it was never meant to lower the standard of living of this generation below the standard of any nation of Europe, even for the sake of those who come after us. It was never meant to cripple industry as it has done. When I make out my credits, I shall put them down all at a fair figure, I shall double our incomings by a complete change in our fiscal system, and I shall put down an income tax which the people can afford and a reasonable super tax on moderate incomes, so that the people can lift their heads up again and have a little money to spend. Then on the

other side, well, we'll just spend what we've got and no more. That's the principle we run a business on; it's the principle in a year's time this country will be run on."

"Flanders would consider your finance a little primitive," the Premier remarked.

"Of course he would," was the quick retort, "because every Chancellor of the Exchequer wants to be called a man of imagination. You don't want imagination with figures. You want a hard head and a stern hand."

The Premier mused for a few moments.

"Forgive a personal question, Marabels, but are you a wealthy man?" he asked.

"I have all I need. My father was a merchant of moderate means in the country. I was educated at a grammar school in Leicester and got a scholarship to Cambridge. I took no degree. I was in business before I was twenty-one."

"And your age now?"

"I am thirty-nine," Marabels replied. "On my thirtieth birthday the capital of the business was roughly speaking a hundred thousand pounds. I changed it then into a profit-sharing concern. As a matter of fact, capital in my business is allotted exactly the same percentage of the profits as in my world scheme. I can't run it the same way because of the Unions, but our profits last year were twenty-two thousand pounds — I took eight thousand pounds, and fourteen thousand was distributed. I have none of the gifts which make for popularity — I shall never be a popular statesman, for instance — but there isn't one of my work people, Labour, Conservative or Socialist, who doesn't vote for me, who doesn't work for me at election time and who doesn't put his heart and soul into the business. They work like human beings, not

machines. That's why we shall go on making more money each year."

"It seems strange that I should know so little of you," the Prime Minister remarked, "considering the closeness of our political association, but I never remember to have heard whether you were married."

"Not yet."

"A bachelor Prime Minister will be something of a novelty," the other reflected.

"I shall probably marry during the next year," Marabels announced.

"You are engaged?"

"Not even that. I have seen the young lady, however, whom I shall probably marry."

The Premier nodded sympathetically.

"Have I, by any chance, the pleasure of knowing her?"

"You know her as well as I do," was the somewhat enigmatic reply.

The Premier was puzzled. Rapidly in his mind he ran over the list of his feminine acquaintances whom Marabels was likely to know. He gave up the task, however.

"Might I be told her name?" he enquired.

"Miss Brown," Marabels confided.

"Miss Brown?" the Prime Minister repeated, in a puzzled fashion. "Curiously enough I don't seem to remember any one of that name."

"The young lady who came with Colonel Dessiter to see you last night," Marabels explained.

"Dessiter's secretary! God bless my soul! I didn't even notice you speak to her."

"I didn't. As a matter of fact I don't ever remember having spoken to her. She represents, however, exactly the type of young woman I shall require for a wife. She is sufficiently agreeable-looking, very neat, very self-re-

specting, calm in her manners, can face a crisis without getting excited, capable of effacing herself when required. She has the gifts which I consider most important in a working man's wife."

The Prime Minister had never expected to laugh on that fateful day, but he did laugh. He leaned back in his chair and yielded himself up to unrestrained mirth at this unexpected appeal to his sense of humour.

"Mr. Marabels," he pronounced, rising and shaking the ashes from his pipe, "you are at any rate consistent. You're clear-cut in all your views, and unencumbered, I should imagine, with a superfluity of sentiment. I wish you the same success in matrimony as I imagine you will achieve politically."

Marabels escorted his guest to the door below.

"Come and spend next week-end at Chequers," the latter invited. "You'll find a few of the others there. We might have an interesting time."

"I shall be very pleased," Marabels accepted. "I must warn you though that I have no country house habits. I play no games, read no novels, never go to the theatre."

The Premier smiled.

"I fancy this week-end," he said, "our chief occupation will be redrafting the constitution."

"In that case," Marabels replied, "I shall be very glad indeed to come."

The Premier returned to Downing Street, as he had come, on foot. His brow was furrowed, his thoughts were sombre. He was a man for whom every one had predicted a great political future — a fluent speaker, a scholar, a man of a logical, well balanced mind and broad outlook. Yet he was face to face, as he knew quite well, with the ruin of his career. His adoption of Marabels was in a sense a chivalrous acknowledgment of the fact. If the

latter's daring scheme met with success no part of the credit would ever attach itself to him. He could never have thought of it, he acknowledged, never have realised it, never under any circumstances have had the courage to stand up in the House, and, speaking those pitiless words of cold truth, invite the class which was nominally the ruling class of the country to submit to deliberate and far-reaching impoverishment. He himself, as he full well knew, would have been no convert to the scheme, but for the raised curtain disclosing all that lay beneath, the absolute certainty of the coming upheaval. Already, as he realised before he had slipped out from Downing Street, his telephone had been besieged. Every influence would be brought to bear upon him. The great monied houses, the princes of industry, the magnates of shipping, would all be pleading their cause in the next few hours. With a sudden flash of inspired knowledge, he remembered one of Marabels' scornful comments — "the capitalist fights to the end because he fights alone, individually, and not for his class. He has nothing to lose. An hour's journey and he is across the Channel. His millions are worth as much and more in France and in Italy as in England. He has enough. If his goose must be forced into ceasing to lay golden eggs, he can scuttle." A gleam of understanding of the colossal selfishness of the world crept into his mind. He found himself wondering, even to the last of his waking moments, what sort of a being Marabels really was, what lay behind the inflexibility of tone and unchanging countenance of the man who had dared, not only to wrap himself in the mantle of the prophet, but was actually preaching his devastating creed with every confidence of success to a nation whose entire financial outline he proposed to retrace.

CHAPTER XXXI

It was in its way a meeting of giants, that hastily summoned conference between the leaders of the Communists, the Labour Party, representatives of the Trades Unions and foreign delegates. At the opening of the proceedings there had been a certain amount of uncertainty. Macpherson should have taken the chair but declined it.

"You go-ahead fellows have assumed command," he said. "Abel Deane or Frankland had better preside."

Abel Deane was voted into the chair — a man of lank physique, pinched features, the hollow eyes of the visionary, a man with long arms which he used continually and to great effect when making speeches, and a voice amazing in its power and quality. He had been a schoolmaster and still preserved his habits of correct speech and somewhat severe deportment. There was nothing of the hail-fellow-well-met about him. His views were violent enough but his expression of them was always guarded, and mingled with it all he had a redeeming leaven of common sense. He opened the meeting in a few noncommittal words. The Government they had deemed moribund had sprung an amazing surprise upon them. He, for his part, would like to know how it appealed to their foreign visitors.

"It is their despairing effort, their Swan Song," Malakoff declared, stroking his beard and noting with disappointment that there was no sideboard in the room. "They realise what our coming means, the writing upon the wall, the doom of the *bourgeoisie*."

"Nevertheless," Abel Deane observed drily, "I think you will all admit that this is the most astute move which

has been made by any British Government for a very long time. After having committed every possible political blunder, after having saddled the country with debt and taxation which has pretty well choked the patriotism of every one, they have shown themselves capable of a supreme act of genius. Marabels is the man, of course, but it seems incredible that he should have prevailed upon so foolish a government to let him have his own way, or that he should stand on one side and permit his amazing scheme to be brought forward and developed as a government measure. Don't let us make any mistake about it. Marabels' speech has altered the whole situation. Even the capitalist has given the scheme his guarded approval. Macpherson here won't deny that he is enthusiastically in favour of it. To be brief, Marabels' speech has made the carrying out of our original scheme, which most of you know all about, almost impossible."

"How, impossible?" Bretskopf demanded gruffly.

"Because the Government have cut away the ground from under our feet," Abel Deane pointed out. "They have admitted our great principle that Capital and Labour stand in inadequate proportions. They offer a readjustment."

"There's no reason why we should tinker about with all these blasted commissions," Frankland declared angrily. "Why not let them know the truth at once? We don't care a damn about their coöperative system. We want the capitalist done away with altogether."

"The capitalist under certain conditions is still a necessary part of any economic organisation," Abel Deane pronounced.

Bretskopf glared at him.

"You say that on behalf of a country which is supposed to be seeking for freedom!" he growled.

"You tried to do without him in Russia," Abel Deane

reminded his interrupter gravely. "You're calling him back again. You're giving options to Americans. You're seeking for capital in every direction."

"Only for outside enterprises," Bretskopf declared. "The existence of the capitalist is diametrically opposed to Soviet principles. We shall get rid of him altogether before long."

"This isn't a general discussion," Frankland intervened truculently. "What about these fool commissions? No one's in favour of accepting them, I hope."

"There is no valid reason why we should refuse them," Abel Deane pointed out. "It is not our policy to declare to the world that compromise does not appeal to us, that it isn't a question of wages, that we are out for nationalisation of mines and all industries. If we did that it would be war from to-morrow, and we're not strong enough for it. Some one in the Government has been too clever for us. They've done what I never thought an English Government would do. They've had spies working all over the country and Europe. They know too many of our secrets. If we hoist the Red Flag to-morrow in the face of this propitiatory move of theirs we set back our cause a decade. Public opinion and popular sympathy would both be dead against us."

"You lack courage," Malakoff scoffed. "I propose a refusal of the commissions, and as a counter-attack that we demand from the Trades Unions strike notices from the railways, transport workers and seamen. That will show them clearly enough what we're out for."

Abel Deane shook his head.

"I favour acceptance of the commissions," he announced. "If their findings are unsatisfactory we can then confer with the Trades Unions and take what steps we think well. The Government will have played their last card and they'll cave in. We shall form a Communist-

cum-Socialist Government — not a sham affair like the last, but a government which if it hasn't got a majority in the House of Commons can still find means of enforcing its will upon the people. At the same time, let me emphasize this: if the commissions are honestly established according to Marabels' scheme, and if their findings are satisfactory, I shall favour their acceptance and shall propose the disbandment of the revolutionary branch of our party."

There was a murmur of mixed approval and disapproval. Then Krasset, the third of the Russians, struck the table before him with his fist.

"You speak like a pacifist," he declared. "The shedding of blood is healthy. France shed blood for freedom, so did Russia."

"The conditions in neither country apply to our own," Abel Deane replied. "In Russia you were war weary. In France there was still a hated aristocracy. Here the killing would be amongst one another. I am against it. I am for a waiting policy, and in the meantime the acceptance of the commissions."

This time the murmur was of assent. The Russians looked around. It was perfectly obvious that they were in a minority.

"Very well then," Malakoff said shortly. "Agree to their commissions, if you must, but there's one condition which in common justice you should make. We're supplying the money bags over here. One of us must be an honorary member of each commission. They're not fools. They know what we're over here for. They'll see the justice of it."

"I am not at all sure that they are likely to agree," Deane feared.

Malakoff tugged at his beard with long, nervous fingers.

"It may be difficult," he admitted, "but it's got to be

done. We're over here with five millions behind us, and more if it's necessary, pledged to the destruction of Capital in your country, to the alteration of the whole constitution of your industries in favour of the working man. We've got to be recognised, and your Prime Minister can put that in his pipe and smoke it."

Abel Deane inclined his head.

"I will include it in our conditions," he conceded. "I may tell you that it is nearly the only one we shall make. The Associated Trades Unions are unanimously in favour of the Government proposal. I have not yet met a member of our own party, with the exception of Mr. Frankland and a few who are absentees from here this afternoon, who are against it. Pritchard is on his way up from Wales but his is only one vote and we sha'n't wait for him. I put it to you in this way, gentlemen — is there any one here against the Government's proposals?"

"Not so long as we don't bind ourselves," one or two stipulated.

"Then the business of the meeting is at an end," Abel Deane declared. "I will see the Prime Minister myself to-night with Mr. Macpherson, and let him know your decision. I have still half an hour to spare," he added. "Is there any matter any one would like to discuss before we go?"

One or two hurried off, but the majority remained.

"If I stay," Malakoff insisted, "you'll have to find me a drink."

Abel Deane rang the bell.

"We don't allow drinks in the Committee Room," he explained, "but the formal part of our meeting is over now. We have a few million critics behind us, you know — just as you have in Russia, I suppose — so we have to be careful."

Malakoff smiled sourly.

"We don't allow them much latitude in the way of criticism. We keep them where they belong."

Abel Deane raised his eyebrows.

"Will you forgive me," he murmured, "if I suggest that that sounds a little autocratic from one of us?"

Malakoff shrugged his shoulders.

"There's no need for there to be any humbug between us. In any form of government there will always be the governors and the governed. If the mob have any remarks to make about us, they pretty soon know about it. Even a republic has its discipline."

Drinks were brought up and dispensed. Abel Deane refused wine but smoked his pipe.

"Since the subject has in a way come up," he said quietly, "and we have a moment or two to spare, I'd like to allude to a personal matter. My comrades and I decided that I ought to mention it."

Malakoff frowned.

"You mean that affair in the Atrium Club?"

Deane assented.

"It was a most unfortunate occurrence," he said gravely. "It won't do us any good, nor you, I am afraid, if we continue the idea of your campaign in the north country. Our working classes don't understand that sort of thing — champagne drinking and women and breaking the law by their leaders. Your people may be more lenient in Russia — perhaps they're content with what you do for them. Anyway there are going to be some nasty things said about that night, and you'd better get prepared for them. When you're up North especially you'll have some questions asked."

"I'll answer them," Malakoff promised, with an evil smile. "It's my belief that the whole business was a put-up job."

"In what respect?"

"A put up job to discredit us. The Club had never been raided before. Why should we have had cards of invitation at our hotel, inviting us for that particular night? Why should that girl Bretskopf and I have been taking round the last few days have insisted upon the Atrium and nowhere else? Why should the manager serve us with champagne when he had refused so many other people? It seems as though the police were waiting for it. They were in the room almost as soon as the wine was upon the table."

"It's an idea," Deane murmured thoughtfully. "Greatson told me this morning that the Home Office had started a new secret service branch we should have to look out for."

"Young Greatson was quite right for once in his life," Malakoff declared. "It was that fellow Dessiter's idea. If he'd lived he was going to run it himself. It's my belief they were responsible for that blasted raid, and I'll swear it was they who tracked Thornton down."

"I thought that was the Military Police?"

"Not they!" Malakoff scoffed. "Besides, will you tell me this? How was it that they made the raid on Mona Hannerton's house on almost the only night Frankland and I had ever been there? They've got that against us, too. One isn't used to that sort of thing in England."

Abel Deane smiled.

"More like Russian methods, eh?"

Malakoff's eyes were veritable points of fire.

"Our methods and our money are the only things likely to push you fellows through to victory anyhow," he declared. "It's not for you and your people and Russia alone we do this, Mr. Deane. We're showing the way of freedom to the world, and you've thrown in your lot with us."

"Up to a certain point," Abel Deane acquiesced coldly. "You are visiting delegates, Malakoff, from a friendly association, and more than welcome, both for the encouragement and the money you bring, but we retain our independence. You must never forget that. Some of us don't go so far as Frankland and his friends, and as yet we have not subscribed to the international doctrines. The English Communist Party mean to work out their own salvation, glad though they are of your generously offered assistance."

Malakoff tugged furiously at his beard. He looked round at the dozen or so of men still grouped at the table, studied their faces and kept silent.

"Our principles," he concluded, with forced moderation, "are at least world principles. The time will come, and before long, when you will see the folly of attempting to localise a movement towards freedom which should be universal."

Abel Deane knocked out the ashes from his pipe, produced a pouch and refilled it with leisurely fingers.

"Any one else anything to talk about?" he asked, looking down the table.

A sallow-faced young man in spectacles, who had somehow the air of ungainly youth brought to premature manhood, leaned forward in his place. His name was Felton, and he had won a seat in Parliament in a northern borough through sheer Red Flag oratory. There were several there present, who knew of his connection with the firm of Lopez and Samuel, of Tooley Street, consignees of merchandise from Barcelona, and knew too that he had escaped capture by the police during an unexpected raid a few days before, by slipping into a lighter from the wharf in seaman's clothes.

"Comrade Malakoff was speaking a few minutes ago," he said, "of this new secret service of the Home Office.

We've something of the same sort running ourselves, I believe. I'm not a member, but in this company I think it would be fair to ask a question. Have you any reason to believe, Mr. Deane, that these people know anything about the whereabouts of the *Volga* and her cargo?"

"Pennington will answer your question," Abel Deane replied. "I may say that I am not a member of the Action Committee myself."

"And our friend Malakoff knows far more of the matter than I do," Pennington declared. "The *Volga* is rather his concern."

Malakoff frowned heavily as he looked across towards Felton.

"The *Volga* is still cruising round the coast of Ireland," he confided. "The Captain got one wireless through safely in cipher. It reached me yesterday. He said he was afraid to land according to instructions as he fears he is being watched. Since you have opened the subject, Comrade Felton, I'll admit I've sometimes felt that Dessiter knew something about the business. He was in Archangel not many months ago. All these anxieties," Malakoff concluded, with a passionate gesture of disgust, "would have been avoided if Fridland had done his job properly, or if we'd been able to get at that infernal little stenographer."

"Well, you had your chance," Pennington remarked calmly.

"So did you," Malakoff retorted. "So had Bretskopf's bombs, which were supposed to be able to blow up St. Paul's Cathedral, so had Frankland who got hold of the bank clerk and then hadn't brain enough to use him."

"Recriminations," Abel Deane observed, "will not help us. Since we are on the subject, is there anything to connect any of us directly or indirectly with this shipment of arms, supposing they should be seized?"

Malakoff's smile, as he nodded across the table, was full of malice.

"Comrade Felton is the consignee."

"And I wish to God I wasn't," that young man declared, taking out a handkerchief and dabbling his forehead. "I happened to have to go to Euston the other morning just at the time the Irish Mail was starting, and the moment I stepped out of the taxi I was shadowed, shadowed to the booking office and on to the platform. It's all this uncertainty," he went on, "which made me hesitate about these commissions. The Government, as it exists at present, none of us care a snap of the fingers about, but I'll tell you the plain truth — I'm afraid of this chap Marabels. He is there in the background, and it's my belief he's playing a deep game. These commissions will mean delay. Delay doesn't matter with a government of poopsticks, but, my God, with a man there — a man like one of us — they may smash the whole thing, strike at us, if they know as much as they seem to, whilst every one's excited about these commissions, and where should we be? Caught unprepared again. We'll never get the people up and ready to fight until the strikes are really going, until they've felt the excitement of it all, and the joy of being out of work and yet drawing their pay. Did you hear Marabels speak last night? Never has any one stood on his feet for this Government and spoken words that sounded like iron, words you couldn't bend. That's the man!"

"After all," Abel Deane said, breaking a momentary silence, "Marabels is the youngest man in the Cabinet. There are several Ministers there who are not going to allow him to take any sort of lead."

"I'm not so sure," Felton muttered. "It's the Premier I'm afraid of. He's sense enough to know he's done. Neither God nor man could ever make a statesman of him,

but when he doesn't wander out of his depth he's plenty of common sense."

Bretskopf, who had spoken little during the meeting, leaned across the table; in his right hand he gripped a tumblerful of wine; with his left he punctuated his words, with short, impressive gestures. In the corner of his mouth was a black cigar.

"Let it be remembered, Deane," he said, "that at this meeting although we are in a minority, Malakoff, Krasset and I declared that you have done ill to listen to this talk of commissions. Our plan of campaign was simpler and better. You should have imposed your will upon the Trades Unions, got the strikes started whilst you had our money to play with, the food stored and arms to put in the hands of the people when they once began to see red. You have lost the chance of a century."

Macpherson suddenly intervened for the first time in the debate.

"I am in entire disagreement with our friend Bretskopf," he announced coldly. "For one thing, the Chairman of the Amalgamated Trades Unions told me only this afternoon that in the face of the present Government proposals, the prospects of a universal strike were almost negligible. Furthermore it is our desire, in our efforts to reshape the social conditions of the country, to keep on our side all men of broad and liberal thought. We should alienate public opinion here, and in America, if we were to refuse an offer like Marabels'. It is the greatest step that has been taken towards a proper adjustment of social conditions in all history. The Government recognises the lack of logical proportion in the earnings of Labour and Capital, and it accepts nationalisation as a subject of discussion. We cannot refuse such an offer; so long as I have any say in the matter, the Socialist Party certainly never will."

"You know your own business best, I suppose," Malakoff remarked sulkily.

Abel Deane rose to his feet.

"The meeting is over," he announced. "You and I, Macpherson, are for Downing Street."

CHAPTER XXXII

The days that followed were the most exciting that Miss Brown had ever known. She took to coming to Whitehall an hour earlier in the morning and leaving later at night, but whenever she came and whenever she left there was an increasing quantity of work to be done. No outside help was possible. The subject matter of some of the reports and correspondence with which she had to deal was with scarcely an exception initialled and marked "for Miss Brown only." She moved her desk and typewriter and entrenched herself in a distant corner of the room, from which place she sometimes watched with unseeing eyes the few favoured callers whom Dessiter admitted into his stronghold. Marabels was there at least three or four times during the day, always with an uncanny gift of selecting the information he desired with lightning-like precision from a mass of material. Often he stood by Miss Brown's side whilst with swift fingers she turned over papers and produced from its properly indexed place the report or the particulars he desired. Always he remained with the expression of a sphinx, scarcely ever speaking, ringed in by a sort of aloofness which matched Miss Brown's own reserve. At such times their eyes never met. He scarcely ever even addressed a direct remark to her, yet sometimes when he was at the other end of the room, talking in a low tone to Dessiter, she would fancy that he was watching her, and, looking up, would find that without any sort of expression, his eyes were fixed upon her. Once when he was confiding to Dessiter an event of great importance, he lowered his voice. Dessiter, glancing up, followed the direction of his eyes.

"My secretary is deaf and dumb," he observed.

Marabels made no reply, but continued in his usual tone. As often as she watched him enter and leave it seemed to Miss Brown that his expression never once changed. He came on one occasion during a brief period of great anxiety. The party to which the Prime Minister belonged were not unanimously content to accept his startling new departure. One of the Ministers whose resignation had been demanded had hesitated. A motion had been suddenly brought forward which amounted practically to a vote of censure upon the Government. For a time the issue had seemed doubtful. At the last moment Marabels had risen to his feet and addressed himself in a few curt words not to his own party but to the Socialists. When the division had come members had thronged the lobbies in the most extraordinary juxtaposition. The Socialists had voted almost solidly for the Government who were saved by a comfortable majority.

"Is this session to see an end of party government?" Dessiter asked Marabels.

"I should like to think so," was the latter's dry reply. "There is only one way to govern without compromise."

"Compromise?" Dessiter repeated.

Marabels nodded. He was a little more discoursive than usual.

"Compromise is a good thing in its way," he said — "sometimes a necessity. On the other hand it frequently means the emasculation of any sound political measure. In twelve months' time I expect to show you how a country should be governed. I have an appointment with Abel Deane to-night, Dessiter. I want all your intimate reports of Malakoff, Bretskopf and Krasset."

"They're pretty reading," Dessiter observed, as he crossed the room towards Miss Brown's desk.

"If Abel Deane's the man I think he is," Marabels said,

"he'll agree to having them out of the country within a week."

Dessiter lit the inevitable cigarette.

"My first recommendations," he recounted, "after John Glyde came into being were addressed to a certain Cabinet Minister who, by the bye, opposed our establishment, and were to the same effect. I received the usual official snub."

"I know who you mean," Marabels observed. "He was the first man whose official *congé* I insisted upon. I have his resignation in my pocket — the most difficult to get of the three."

Miss Brown had been busy amongst the files in the safe. She produced a little pile of documents, typed a neat tabulation for the outside, and secured them with a rubber band. Marabels placed them in his pocket. He glanced at the clock.

"I still have five minutes," he remarked. "Dessiter, with your permission I should like to address a word or two to your secretary."

Dessiter looked at him in surprise.

"Why of course," he answered. "You can speak to her whenever you like."

Miss Brown half swung round in her chair, her blue eyes very wide open, something of surprise showing also in her face. Marabels came a step or two nearer and looked down at her.

"Miss Brown," he said, "I have become a great admirer of your work."

His tone was absolutely matter of fact. There was no sign in his face of any sort of enthusiasm or even a scrap of feeling.

"I am very glad to hear you say so, Mr. Marabels," she replied, suddenly conscious of the fact that it was the first time in their acquaintance he had ever addressed a direct remark to her.

"Work," Marabels continued, "method, orderliness, are all indications of the life behind. In saying, therefore, that I admire your work, Miss Brown, I should like you to understand that I admire you. I should be very glad if you would be my wife."

Dessiter dropped his cigarette and forgot to pick it up. Miss Brown's eyes grew larger and larger, her demure little mouth was open, her first expression was one of bewildered surprise. Immediately afterwards came a little rush of colour in her cheeks.

"I don't understand you," she faltered.

"Then for the first time I am disappointed in you, Miss Brown," Marabels went on. "My words were plain enough. I have never thought of marriage, but I shall be Prime Minister within a few months, and it has been suggested to me by the present occupant of that office that a wife is almost a necessity. It would be impossible for me to live with an ordinary woman. Yours is the type which appeals to me. I repeat my offer."

Miss Brown rose to her feet. She looked appealingly across the room towards Dessiter, but his face was averted and expressionless.

"I am to take it then that you are serious?" she asked incredulously.

"I am not a man," he answered, "who wastes or needs to repeat his words. However, the occasion is perhaps unusual, although I had hoped that you would have been able to answer me one way or the other without hesitation."

"I will try to do so then," Miss Brown acquiesced. "I thank you very much but I do not wish to marry you."

Marabels considered for a moment.

"Is there anything more I should have said? — Any information you desire? From my observation of you I had gathered that such would be unnecessary. I offer you

an assured position, a comfortable home and all the attentions of a husband."

"All three of which I must respectfully decline."

There was a moment's silence. To all appearance Miss Brown was now quite calm. She glanced at the clock, put the cover on her typewriter and, moving across the room, took down her coat and hat which were hanging upon a peg.

"There is nothing more I can do, Colonel Dessiter?" she asked.

"Nothing, thank you," he replied, looking at her curiously.

"I will not insult my estimate of your character," Marabels said, "by asking if your decision is final. You will permit me to say, however, that I regret it."

"I am very sorry," Miss Brown rejoined. "Good night. And good night, Colonel Dessiter."

"Good night, Miss Brown."

She closed the door behind her and went down the steps towards the lift with trembling knees.

Outside in the street into which she passed with unseeing eyes, she was conscious of being tapped lightly upon the arm. She hesitated, to find Paul looking down into her face with his usual boyish smile.

"You forgive that I am here to meet you?" he asked eagerly.

"Of course. Have you been waiting long?"

"Barely half an hour. I came because ——"

"Do you mind not telling me just now," she interrupted, "but walk with me until I speak, and say nothing."

He obeyed without a word, after a single anxious downward glance. Miss Brown was wholly unable to account for the curious emotion which possessed her. Her knees were still trembling; she was conscious that the tears were

very near her eyes. It was a turbulent agitation which she failed utterly to understand. For Marabels, as a magnificent machine, a sort of mechanical superman, she had always had the most profound admiration. He existed for her as something entirely outside the amenities of personal life. Why she should be so affected by his amazing declaration remained then and for long afterwards a mystery to her. Lacking any ordinary explanation, she decided, as they neared Northumberland Avenue, that it was because no man before had ever asked her to marry him.

"I am recovered," she announced suddenly.

"Nothing has happened, I trust, to upset you?"

"Nothing that should have upset me. It was simply an overwhelming surprise. Now tell me why you came to meet me."

"Can't you guess?" he asked. "Isn't this the night Miss Frances was coming up?"

"Why, I believe it is," she admitted.

"Please, Miss Brown," he went on, "will you come to dinner to-night — and bring her?"

"Of course I will," she assented promptly. "I know Frances would be terribly disappointed if we dined anywhere else. No night clubs though, Mr. Paul."

"That is a promise. I knew nothing of what was likely to happen that night, of course. I am very, very sorry. It may be though for the best. You have heard the rumours to-night?"

"I hear nothing but rumours — and a few facts — all day long," Miss Brown declared.

"There's a late edition just out which announces semi-officially that the Government have refused Abel Deane's condition that one of these foreigners should be allowed a place upon the commissions. If it is the truth, there will be a crisis. Abel Deane will have to choose between

alienating his foreign supporters and seeing the whole scheme crumble away."

"You will forgive me, but I do not discuss these matters," Miss Brown reminded him in her best official manner.

"You are quite right not to," Paul assented. "You must excuse me that I am very, very interested. Those three men who have brought their millions over here bring nothing of the spirit of Russia. There is nothing Russian about them except their birth. Their discomfiture here would be a joy to us because any blow to the Russia of to-day helps us forward towards the Russia of to-morrow."

"It is quite natural," Miss Brown conceded gravely, "that you should be interested in anything which has to do with your country. You shall now tell me, if you please, what you are going to offer us for dinner?"

He laughed heartily.

"Forgive me that I am so garrulous," he begged. "There will be a clear soup — not so bad. There will be at least the cheese with it to remind you that if we could have afforded it, it would have been *petite marmite*. And then there is some veal. It is very good veal. My father usually grumbles, but he has dined off it already and he says that it is good veal."

"Then there is a compote of fruit," Miss Brown ventured, with a barely repressed smile.

"How did you guess?" he demanded.

"Bananas and oranges and thin slices of apple."

"Wonderful! But you see," he went on apologetically, "fruit is a very difficult matter. For twopence extra you can have a small jug of cream. There is no profit on that I can assure you, and it makes a difference."

"It sounds a most delicious dinner," Miss Brown declared, "and I am getting hungry talking about it. I'll fetch Frances and you can rely upon seeing us in three

quarters of an hour. But before you go, Mr. Paul — I am going to take a taxi from here — I have a question to ask you."

They paused under a gas lamp, and Miss Brown drew from the pocket of her coat a page from one of the morning illustrated papers.

"Tell me, Mr. Paul, is that you and your father?"

She pointed to a picture in the centre page. It was a snapshot of Paul's father in full uniform, with a long line of medals and decorations across his chest, and by his side Paul, in the white uniform of the Russian Bodyguard, also with medals and decorations. Underneath was a brief line:

Two of our Russian guests leaving Buckingham Palace after the Levée this afternoon — General Prince Serge Alexis of Norgadia, a connection of the late Tzar, and his only son, Prince Paul of Norgadia.

Paul flushed a little as he glanced at the paper.

"I am very sorry that the photographers were too quick for us," he said. "Please do not tell Frances. Please forget it yourself, if you can. We go once a year to humour my father. He thinks it is a duty we owe the family. We change at a friend's house near, and up till now we have escaped discovery. It was most unfortunate."

"Let me take you a little way," Miss Brown begged, with her foot on the step of the taxi.

But Paul, with his shabby bowler hat in his hand and his overcoat flapping about him, had already disappeared into the misty twilight.

Miss Brown sat back in her taxi and in a momentary wave of sympathy she forgot her own emotional experience. The figure of Paul loomed lifelike before her. She pictured him as she had seen him so often, waiting in the

restaurant, his face turned expectantly towards the door, hoping always for opulent-looking customers, yet welcoming every one with the same grave politeness. She seemed to hear his earnest voice with its note of wistful expostulation when he had assured her that there was no profit upon the small jug of cream for twopence. She ground her little heel into the coconut matting of the taxicab.

"Beasts!" she muttered.

Then other thoughts flooded back into her mind, and she felt once more the uneasy thrill of those incredible moments.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Frances had removed her outdoor clothes and was lounging in her dressing gown, not as usual upon the bed, but in the one easy-chair. An unopened evening paper lay by her side and an unlit cigarette drooped from her lips.

"Hurry up," Miss Brown enjoined, as she took off her coat. "We are going to dine with Mr. Paul. He knew you were going to be up and he came all the way to Whitehall and waited half an hour outside to get me to promise."

Frances' face softened for a moment, and then she indulged in a little grimace.

"Oh, I don't know," she exclaimed discontentedly. "What's the use?"

"You don't know?" her friend repeated. "Why, I thought you liked Mr. Paul!"

Frances' lip curled for a moment; the light shone out of her eyes.

"Of course I like Paul," she repeated. "Any fool would. He's one of the dearest beings alive. He makes any of the other men one meets seem absolutely impossible, but don't you see, Edith, what's the good of it all? That poor boy, carrying the restaurant upon his back, supporting his mother and father and sister, and only doing it by sheer slavery! What's the good of adoring him? What place is there for me or for you or for any of us in his life, except just a few moments of pleasant friendship? And then — look here."

She flung the same illustrated paper which Miss Brown had seen upon the table.

"A prince!" she scoffed. "A pretty princess I should

make, wouldn't I, trying to live on what was left over after Paul had fed the family? Poor boy," she went on, "I'd do anything in the world to help him, give him anything in the world he asked for, but it wouldn't help either of us. You're a little fool, Edith, to keep on bothering me about him. He's a great deal more dangerous to me than all the Franklands in the world ever were. You don't know how near I was last time I saw him to throwing my arms round his neck and telling him what a dear I thought him, and asking whether there wasn't any way I could make him a little happier."

Miss Brown went over and passed her arm round Frances' shoulders. There was sympathy in her tone.

"And even then, dear," she whispered, "it wouldn't have been dangerous at all. Paul would have taken you into his great arms, he would have thought that it was just the custom amongst English girls to be frank, and he would have led you to his mother and father and introduced you with a little set speech as his fiancée."

"And they would have groaned," Frances murmured, with a smile, half humorous, half pitiful, "and thought to themselves — 'another one to feed!'"

"If they had felt like that," Miss Brown declared, "you would never have known it. They are of the world who know how to hide such things."

"Well, anyhow, it wouldn't have done," Frances sighed. "That's the cruel part of things. Life's beastly, anyway. I've played the game up to my twenty-seventh year, and the only two men worth thinking about, who have ever wanted to have anything to do with me, are Noel Frankland and Paul. One isn't a gentleman and wants to make me his mistress, and the other's a prince with a family to support and not a penny to do it with."

Perhaps for the first time in her life, Miss Brown was a little hard.

"Frances," she said firmly, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Whether he can afford to marry you just now or not, there are millions of girls in your position who would give anything in the world to have a man like Paul care for them and tell them so. That in itself would seem sufficient happiness."

Frances was instantly repentant. She threw her arms round her friend's neck, half crying, half laughing.

"My dear, of course you're right!" she exclaimed. "I'm a selfish, egotistical little pig, whining away like this. Run in and have your bath, dear. I've had mine. I'm going to put on my prettiest dress, and we'll go and dine with Paul."

Things had gone a little wrong with the dinner at the Café Russe during Paul's absence. Some hungry compatriots had dined and demanded a second portion of soup, which had necessitated the remainder being watered. The remnants of the veal offered to the two late arrivals were skimpy, and the oranges for the compote of fruit were certainly sour. Paul waited upon the two girls anxiously, and with a happy afterthought brought them a bottle of white wine.

"My father desires to offer you the compliment of this bottle of Hungarian wine," he announced. "It is perhaps not so good as the best French vintages, but it is the nearest which is grown to our own country, and is a great deal drunk there."

"Won't you take one glass with us, please?" Miss Brown invited, after suitable acknowledgments had been made, and glasses raised to the General who was seated in a distant corner with a crony.

Paul hesitated.

"May I?" he asked. "I do not think that any one else will come in to-night. To tell you the truth," he

added simply, "we hope not, because there is nothing more to eat."

"That is our fault," Frances declared. "We were hungry and we have eaten everything. We have too good appetites, really, to be attractive customers at any restaurant. You'll have to charge us more money, Mr. Paul, or else give us less."

"I fear that you came off rather badly to-night," he regretted.

"Don't be absurd!" Miss Brown scoffed. "I was almost afraid that I should have to leave some of that delicious veal."

Frances and Paul smoked cigarettes. Miss Brown sipped her coffee with an air of content.

"I like your little restaurant, Mr. Paul," she confided, during a pause in the conversation between the other two. "There is something so homelike about it. But your people — your clients — are very silent. There is scarcely any laughter and not much conversation. They come and go like ghosts."

"They belong, all of them," Paul reminded her, "to the suffering classes, to the people who are still dazed with their misfortunes. Yet sometimes it is different. I have a cousin, Alexis, who every now and then has money. He sells motor cars for an American who treats him very well. When he has made a sale he sometimes brings every one connected with it in to dinner. He always lets me know beforehand, for they like to drink a great deal of wine, and they like special dishes prepared. Those nights we make quite a profit," he sighed, "but they do not come often."

"We will have a great celebration ourselves," Miss Brown promised, "as soon as all these troubles are over."

"That will be very pleasant. You are a strange people, you English," he continued thoughtfully. "The whole

country is faced to-day with those great issues upon which her future must depend — the same issues, but very differently joined, to those which destroyed us. And look at your papers. Last Saturday — only two days ago — there were golf competitions at every club near London, and hundreds of competitors. There were steeplechases, football, fox hunting, everything as usual. In a matter of hours — no, at this very moment — your *bourgeoisie* and what remains of your aristocracy are facing the people in revolt — and nothing happens. Millions pass through the streets and jostle shoulders with one another, going about their everyday business. There is no fighting, there are no outrages, no mobs in the street, very few processions. The great decisions are being thought out behind closed doors."

"Tell us what you think of our new Cromwell and this amazing offer of his?" Frances begged.

"I think that he will save your country. He has won the entire support of the old-fashioned Socialists, and has cut the ground from under the feet of all save the most advanced Communists. He has thrown the ranks of the Labour Party into confusion. No one knows now what may happen. There are many who think that his offer is a betrayal of his party, that he has played into the hands of the mob. I do not think so. I myself was brought up to think of the people as the natural servants of the rich and well-born. It is time such an idea was discarded, time indeed for the safety of us all. The scavengers of my own country have taught the world that the extermination of the capitalist is impossible. He is a necessary cog in the wheel of production. All that is necessary is a readjustment of the situation between Capital and Labour. Marabels knew that that had to come. It is the hallmark of a great man that he anticipates. Yet," Paul went on, after a moment's pause, "although this amaz-

ing offer of his has changed the whole situation, nothing yet is certain. No one can tell whether in ten days those commissions will be sitting and your social life afterwards reëstablished, or whether your country will be stricken with paralysis, with no railways, no fires, little food, and the snarl of the people growing louder and louder, and nearer every day. One of these two things must happen, yet the first headline I saw in the evening's paper is an announcement that two of your great golf professionals will play a match next Wednesday for a thousand pounds!"

"We are like that," Frances mused.

"Why?" Paul demanded.

"Lack of temperament, I should think," she replied. "A nation whose people could compose your sort of music was bound some time to find itself in a state of fiery chaos. 'A nation's music,' Hengen once said, 'is the interpretation of its character.' Well, we know all about ours."

"I do not remember that I know the name of any of your musicians," Paul reflected.

"Gilbert and Sullivan," Frances murmured.

"Anyhow," Miss Brown remarked, beginning to collect her belongings, "if being without the genius for music means that as a nation we have a larger amount of common sense and more dislike for violent measures, then I think that we should congratulate ourselves. I've had a trying day, and I am going straight home to bed."

Outside the night was fine but windy. Miss Brown, whilst she was waiting for her taxicab, crossed the street to read the headlines on a news placard — great, black typed lines of ominous significance:

COMMISSIONS IN DANGER
REPORTED REFUSAL OF THE GOVERNMENT
TO ACCEPT RUSSIAN DELEGATES

CHAPTER XXXIV

For once rumour was true. At eleven o'clock on the following morning, in reply to an urgent telephone message, Malakoff, Bretskopf and Krasset were shown into a private room of the Communist Headquarters in Kingsway, and, very much to their annoyance, kept waiting for several minutes. Malakoff, after a contemptuous glance around a barely furnished apartment which contained no suggestion of possible hospitality, lit one of his noisomely perfumed cigarettes and walked restlessly up and down.

"These Englishmen tire me!" he exclaimed bitterly. "There's plenty of red blood amongst the people, but their leaders, except Frankland, are deadheads. We come over here and make everything easy for them, we lay the mines underneath, and the whole thing needs now but the wave of a single torch. And yet they were willing to have postponed everything once more, to have wasted time with these muddling commissions when everything was ready."

"Lucky for us," Bretskopf growled, "that Marabels refused to have us in."

"My God, you're right," Malakoff assented vigorously. "If this Government had agreed to Deane's suggestion, we should have gone droning on and had the whole business to start again. As it is, I shall insist now on bringing the railways and transport people out without a second's delay. We'll have the arms landed to-morrow night — Frankland has his bodyguard all right — and we'll hoist the Red Flag on Wednesday. I'm sick of all this talk of peace and compromise. We're here for a bloody war and bloody war it's going to be."

Abel Deane hurried into the room with a word of apology. He was accompanied, somewhat to the surprise of the three Russians, by Macpherson.

"I thought it best to call for a meeting of the Emergency Committee," he explained. "Frankland was a few minutes late and kept us waiting."

"If you have held a meeting of the Emergency Committee," Malakoff demanded, "why were we not summoned?"

"You are only honorary members," Deane reminded them, "and as you were intimately connected with the subject we had to discuss, we thought it better that you were not present. You've a copy of the Prime Minister's letter, Malakoff. I sent it to you at once."

Malakoff nodded.

"And damned glad I was to read it," he declared. "If our comrades here have a fault it is that you are just a little gullible. That scheme of Marabels' of commissions for every industry was a damned clever one. If they'd been shrewd enough to agree to our joining it we should have lost the greatest opportunity in the world. I should like to have seen your reply to the Prime Minister, Deane. One line would have been enough if I'd dictated it. 'We stand by our allies and comrades in the cause, whatever their nationality. To hell with your commissions.'"

It was the moment of crisis. Malakoff was obviously completely at his ease, absolutely and entirely confident.

"That is not precisely the answer which we have decided to make to the Prime Minister," Macpherson announced gravely. "We should naturally have preferred the presence of one of you upon the commissions, and at your own suggestion we proposed it. The Prime Minister's refusal is definite and final. He has left no loophole whatever for compromise. We have had therefore to make up our minds one way or another. We cannot afford to deny ourselves the immense benefit which we feel will

result from these commissions, and we have therefore decided — the Emergency Committee has decided — with only one dissentient, to accept the Government's conditions."

There was no doubt whatever that Malakoff's previous attitude had not been one of bluff, and that he was genuinely amazed. He leaned back in his chair, the picture of astonishment, the storm already working up within him as he realised the import of Macpherson's words. It was Bretskopf who first found speech.

"You're going to betray us all — betray the people?" he gasped incredulously.

"By all the devils in hell you're mad!" Malakoff cried. "From Glasgow to London, millions are waiting for the signal. Deane, have you taken leave of your senses? I can understand Macpherson. He's lost the revolutionary spirit, but — you're a people's man, aren't you? You're not going to sell their cause like this!"

"We look at the matter differently," Deane replied seriously. "We acknowledge all that you have done for the cause. We have in many cases accepted your advice and the Trades Unions were prepared to receive your subscription of money, but one and all, with the exception of Frankland, we approve of this scheme of commissions for every industry. Mind you, Marabels has accepted our principles. He has laid it down clearly that nationalisation shall be on the agenda in every case, and he has put it down in black and white that he accepts the principle of the readjustment of Capital. At least we must see how it works out."

"You're b . . . . y fools, all of you!" Malakoff shouted, in a white fury. "You've been got at. Compromise will never bring you what you want. These men will turn you inside out. You'll be a nation of slaves until the Red Flag flies in the Houses of Parliament, and that

can be in one month's time, unless you play the craven. You'll have to climb down, Deane. Your Emergency Committee doesn't represent the people. We shall appeal to them direct."

"You can do as you please about that," was the cold rejoinder. "Our Emergency Committee of seven was elected by the Trades Unions, a meeting of the Communist Party and the Socialists. As I told you before, we have agreed to accept the Government's terms."

Malakoff rose to his feet.

"What do I care about your seven imbeciles!" he demanded. "There are seven hundred thousand, seven million of our party in Great Britain. They shall hear the truth, hear it from under the Red Flag. It is time you people were put in your place. All this bungling talk of a 'sane' revolution makes me ill. The Communist world demands something from you. You have had their mandate; if you refuse it, you must take the consequences."

Abel Deane rose also to his feet. The air of strain in the room seemed to have become intensified. Bretskopf was breathing heavily; Krasset, silent with passion, was beating upon the table with his fists. Abel Deane's long face was strained and serious. He spoke, however, without hesitation.

"Malakoff, and you Krasset, and you Bretskopf," he said solemnly, "this is an hour for plain speech. We have never recognised an International Communist Society as exercising any control over our movements. Every country may have the same problems to face, but in every country they require dealing with in a different fashion. If the Communists in any other country of Europe struck a blow to-day for a greater measure of liberty, we might help them with counsel and money, but we shouldn't interfere. We welcome your help, but when you differ from us in policy we do not desire your interference."

"You've lost your senses, man!" Malakoff exclaimed. "What are we here for, do you suppose? We are world politicians. We are not to be flouted as though we were of no account by you, the leader of the most sluggish party in our cause. What about the money we've had to squeeze out of our own people to help you? What about the shiploads of arms we have waiting? What about the pamphlets we've brought you, the men we've introduced into your great shipyards and railways, even into the Army and Navy? What's the matter with you all? Have you pumped the blood out of your veins and filled them with milk? Have you lost your spirit? For years we've been waiting for this moment to destroy the capitalism and the Empire of Great Britain. To-day we can do it, and free your people."

"Malakoff," Macpherson intervened, "in a sense we'll admit you have a grievance. We may have misled you as to our ultimate views ——"

"Blast you and your ultimate views!" Malakoff interrupted. "We all know what's happened to you. You no more represent Labour in these days than an English duke."

"Nevertheless," Macpherson continued, "in this country there are still many of the people who have confidence in the views I represent. We want the things which a revolution would bring, but we want that revolution to be of our own ordering. We don't want to put arms into the hands of the mob, half of whom would only be out for loot and slaughter. We don't want to make history any uglier reading than necessary. We want certain things for the toilers of the world, and we want the capital of the world redistributed in fairer proportions. We see our way towards obtaining our ends peacefully and sanely. We've adopted our own way and we're going to stick to it."

"To be perfectly frank," Deane put in, "you foreigners may be all right in your own country, but after my last visit there I've come to the conclusion that your methods could never be ours. Anyway we're going to run our own show our own way. We may seem ungrateful, but on the other hand you didn't come here as philanthropists."

Malakoff was recovering from the first intensity of his shock, but there was still a dazed look in his face. His tone became less passionate, but, if possible, more menacing.

"You must understand," he announced, "that I refuse on my own behalf and on behalf of the millions whom I represent to accept your judgment. I say that unless you are prepared to crawl back once more under the heel of your capitalists you must strike now when all has been made easy for you. You and your Emergency Committee may imagine that you represent the millions of your party. I declare to your face that you do not. You are traitors to your international fellows throughout the world. There isn't a spark of true revolutionary spirit in one of you. It's war, Deane. You understand that? Frankland and his following are on our side. You know that. We'll form a Red Party and oust you both."

"Get to work, my lad," were Deane's farewell words. "We'll give you all the fight you want."

That night Malakoff received the second shock of the day, and probably the greatest of his life. He, with Bretskopf, Krasset, Frankland, Pennington and another Communist Member of Parliament as guests, was seated in his private sitting room at the Hotel Splendide, engaged in the consumption of a very noteworthy banquet and the formation of a variety of sinister plans. Towards the end of the repast the head waiter, who had been serving them, ushered in without announcement two visitors.

The younger, obviously the subordinate in the business on hand, remained in the background; his companion, although without any form of greeting, advanced towards the diners who recognised him with amazement.

"My name is Marabels," he announced coldly. "My companion is Mr. Digby Holmes of the Home Office. I have business with three of you gentlemen — Serge Malakoff, Ivan Bretskopf and Paul Krasset."

"Business?" Malakoff repeated angrily. "You come at a strange hour and in a strange fashion. This is a private dinner party."

"I should have been here weeks before on the same errand if I had had my own way," Marabels replied. "As it is, however, kindly listen to me."

"Our business hours," Malakoff declared harshly, "are between eleven and four. If you have anything to say to us, come and say it at Kingsway to-morrow. You may be able to bully your weak-kneed Government, but we're not afraid of you."

"I come armed with powers," Marabels said quietly, "which make such remarks ridiculous. I am the mouthpiece of the British Government. Kindly listen to me attentively."

Malakoff had relapsed into his place, impressed against his will. Bretskopf glared across the table.

"It has come to the knowledge of the Home Office," Marabels began, "that a steamer from a Baltic port is lying off the coast of Ireland with a large cargo of arms and ammunitions of which Lopez and Samuel are the nominal consignees. Evidence is forthcoming that these arms are a gift from the nation which you represent, Mr. Malakoff, to be landed and distributed here amongst the disaffected of our population. This circumstance, in the unsettled conditions prevailing just at present, is not regarded with favour by His Majesty's Government."

"We are not here to please His Majesty's Government," Malakoff blustered.

"Furthermore," Marabels continued, "it has been pointed out to the authorities that you, Malakoff, were present in the house of Lady Hannerton at Camberley one night, a short time ago, when an English ex-sergeant shot himself rather than be arrested for the dissemination of seditious literature emanating from sources over which you have control. You were the guests that evening of Lady Hannerton, who has been asked to leave the country on account of her undesirable activities in an English military centre."

"Anything else?" Malakoff scoffed, although already an ominous dread was stealing upon him.

"The bombs which caused the destruction of certain bank premises in South Audley Street were shipped from Barcelona from a source known to Bretskopf here to the bogus Lopez and Samuel who were also the consignees of these arms. We have evidence establishing Bretskopf's connection with this firm. The British Government have further studied with regret a number of incendiary speeches made in Bristol, Leeds and London by all three of you gentlemen during the period of your visit to this country. You are representing here, at a very critical time in English history, a political influence and party of whose doctrines we disapprove, and you are representing a country with which we are not in diplomatic accord. The Home Secretary, therefore, has decided, under a special ordinance, to dispense with the usual procedure in such cases, and has issued deportation orders for you, Serge Malakoff, Ivan Bretskopf, and Paul Krasset; and Mr. Digby Holmes here, who represents the Home Office, will see you off at Liverpool Street Station at ten o'clock to-night. You can inspect the orders if you wish. You will embark from Hull and travel as far as Flushing in a

gunboat which His Majesty's Government has placed at your disposal. After that your movements will not concern us, but it is as well for me to add that in the present state of political unrest your return to this country is not desired and will be rendered impossible."

Malakoff rose to his feet, a thin, swaying figure of defiance.

"This is my answer to you and your Government," he declared. "I am here not on a mission to them, but on a mission to the people who will soon be their masters. I decline to leave the country — I speak for myself and my friends — we are here and we stay here. To-morrow I shall make public throughout England this visit of yours, and you shall see then what will happen."

"The law does not permit such an outrage," Frankland declared. "I shall bring the matter up in the House to-morrow."

"You will have every opportunity," Marabels assured him, "so long as you do not abuse your position. As for you gentlemen from Russia, I beg you, however, to accept the inevitable. You have half an hour in which to make any necessary preparations."

Malakoff sat down and poured himself out a glass of wine. He turned his shoulder upon Marabels.

"We have had enough of this foolishness," he said. "This is a private party, and you intrude."

Marabels motioned to his companion, who moved towards the door. Then Malakoff's heart sank. One — two — three — and a further phalanx behind. There they stood, representatives of the irrefutable law, something grim and inevitable in their size, their precise uniform, their immobility.

"I trust," Mr. Digby Holmes said suavely, "that I shall not have to make use of the escort with which I have been provided. It is my duty to see you upon the

ten o'clock train, Mr. Malakoff, with your two friends, and it is the duty of the escort of police by which I am accompanied to take any steps which may be necessary to aid me in the execution of my duty."

Malakoff flung on to the table the remainder of the glass of wine which he had been drinking.

"It is an outrage!" he shouted. "You will answer for this, you and your blasted country!"

"The people will hang you all upon the lamp-posts before the month is out," Bretskopf snarled.

Marabels shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly.

"Try to persuade your friends, Mr. Pennington," he begged, as he turned away, "for the sake of their own dignity, to accept the situation. You know for yourself that the law in this country, slow though it may be to move, can never for a moment be flouted. Every opportunity will be given to you to express any grievance you may feel on their behalf in the House of Commons to-morrow. I shall make it my personal duty to attend and reply to you."

Pennington turned reluctantly towards the Russian delegates.

"You'll have to go," he decided. "We'll give the Government a warm time to-morrow, and we'll have you back, but you'll have to go now."

"Have me back!" Malakoff shouted. "I'll find my way into hell sooner than ever set foot in this country again."

Marabels looked over his shoulder from the door.

"You anticipate the decision at which the Government of this country has already arrived, Malakoff," he said. "We have borne with treason mongers and sedition spreaders long enough."

He departed, closing the door noiselessly behind him. Malakoff, Bretskopf, and Krasset, each standing, watched his disappearance, silent, with murderous faces. Frank-

land too had risen and was walking restlessly up and down the room. Pennington, with his hands thrust deep in his trousers pockets, his chin lowered, sat staring on to the disordered tablecloth. Mr. Digby Holmes, his eyes fixed upon the clock, waited patiently. In the background his escort stood to attention.

CHAPTER XXXV

Three nights later in the House of Commons, Abel Deane, at the close of a speech portentous and full of determination yet admirably balanced, brought down the House with a peroration which thrilled for a moment even the most hardened of legislators when they remembered the wild and rabid utterances of less responsible members of the Party which he led.

"My friend, the Member for Hartlebury," he said, "has asked a question of the Home Secretary with regard to the deportation of three delegates to the Communist Headquarters of this country from Soviet Russia. It will be noted that neither the Honourable Member who is in charge of the destinies of the Socialist Party nor I myself, who may be said to lead the more advanced section of Labour — I who frankly profess myself a Communist — have asked any question or uttered any protest with regard to this matter. I have refrained from doing so for this reason: we were a few weeks ago on the point of entering upon the greatest industrial struggle in history. Capital was martialling all its forces to defend itself; Labour was only too eager to accept battle. In the midst of this crisis an offer was made to us by the Government, of which at the moment I will only say that we decided to accept it. Our prayerful hope is that it may make for peace. We are not a party of fools who seek for the impossible. We don't make the mistakes of the theorists in another country who prate about the complete abolition of Capital and whose experiments have simply demonstrated the fact that it is a necessary adjunct to civilisation. Capital, so long as it receives a portion and not an

unjust share of the rewards of production, is a necessary concomitant of enterprise. Labour, Brains and Capital, each working hand in hand, are all three necessary for the commercial existence of a nation. The issue upon which we were proposing to join battle was that until now Capital has secured a dominating and unfair share of rewards which Labour has helped to earn. For the first time in history we have found a statesman nominally in opposition to us who has had the foresight and sagacity to recognise the majority of our principles and to propose this series of commissions, already, I am happy to say, fructifying, which may produce for this country social conditions which should carry her once more into the front ranks of the nations of the world.

"Whenever one of the over-young and over-enthusiastic members of our party wants to strike a sensational note and fire the blood of his audience he waves a Red Flag and talks of revolution, and whenever one of the staid journals, representing the immutable order of unchanging things, desires to make the flesh of its readers crawl, it pictures the horror of bloody revolution which is supposed to be the dream of every one who calls himself a Communist. I admit that we have always desired and planned for a revolution, but our desire is, and has always been, that the revolution should be bloodless, a revolution of agreement, of sanity, a changing of the old order of things, not by disgraceful and un-English methods, not by an incitement to loot and plunder and outrage, but by the measured ways of statesmanship, by ways which will not cost a single life, by methods which will leave behind them no regret. It is because a far-seeing member of your Government has proposed means by which we may attain our revolution by those methods that I have kept my place during the debate to which we have just listened. We are content to work out our own destiny,

and we have ceased from to-day to welcome or desire any form of foreign interference. The victims of the Home Secretary's decree who have just left this country have issued a manifesto to our party which I assure this House, so far as we are concerned, will meet with a scanty and lukewarm reception. All that we desire for ourselves and for the people we will win for ourselves and in our own fashion without adopting the methods of other countries and without seeking the help of any foreign nation."

There was a reply of a few minutes only from the Prime Minister — a reply dignified but full of reciprocal sympathy. Soon afterwards the House rose. It was significant of the new order of things that Marabels and Abel Deane passed out together.

"Give and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom," was the Bishop of London's text at Westminster Abbey on the following Sunday. The principle of his sermon, the most eloquent perhaps which he had ever preached, seemed somehow or other to have become a part of the atmosphere of the next few weeks. Mine owners, factory owners, ship owners and railway directors, appeared curiously enough to come to a simultaneous recognition of the fact that the old days of carping barter were passing. The less generously disposed shrugged their shoulders and evoked their philosophy: "Better to lose a portion than to lose all" was their motto. One Welsh coal owner, whose imagination was touched, did a great deal to heal a decade of ill-feeling by a sensational act of generosity.

"I have made three millions," he announced, "by my five mines in South Wales. I will hand them over to the commission now sitting for the benefit of the miners, to be worked on any principle of nationalisation which they

may agree as being fair. The commission may decide upon the amount of capital required to work them, which I shall provide, and the interest on that capital can go to the establishment of any Provident or Pension Fund which the miners themselves may select. I have made my bit out of the mines. I will give the chaps who helped me make it a chance."

In a week, one, the most important, of the commissions was actually at work. In a fortnight seven others were established. The coal strike notices had been withdrawn and, as though by a miracle, production seemed to increase in almost every industry throughout the country. In three weeks there were seventeen commissions sitting, four of whom had already had their decision accepted and their recommendations being carried into effect. Every day Miss Brown on her arrival in Whitehall found her pile of work diminishing. There came a time when Dessiter, who had been travelling up and down the country upon a special mission, came in from an interview with Marabels, threw himself into an easy-chair and sat there for some time in deep thought. Miss Brown knew better than to disturb him, but her heart sank a little at the idea of what might be coming.

"Miss Brown," he said at last, "X. Y. O. is on its last legs."

"I was afraid it might be so," she replied sadly.

"Don't forget," Dessiter enjoined, "that ours has been a wonderful page in departmental history. We pass away in triumph, and not to oblivion. No one will ever know the details of our work, but we helped, Miss Brown — we helped a great deal."

"Mr. Marabels himself has acknowledged that," she reminded him. "That last visit of yours to Moscow and Archangel, the meeting with ——"

"All to be forgotten," he interrupted. "Let those

things pass out of your mind as they are doing from mine. Our work, however, has been appreciated. Marabels would see to that of course. They have just offered me a baronetcy which I have refused, and a money grant, which I do not need. I am glad to be able to tell you, Miss Brown, though," he went on, " that they are allotting the sum of five thousand pounds for distribution amongst my personal staff in lieu of any pension. My staff consists of you."

" Five thousand pounds! " Miss Brown gasped.

" It will bring you in about two hundred and fifty a year," he continued. " Not an immense sum, but enough to make you independent."

" It is very wonderful," she murmured a little wistfully, " but — I'd rather go on working."

Dessiter smiled.

" There comes a time," he said, " when one reaches the natural end of one's task. It is the opinion of the Home Office, and my own too, that in these days of a vastly better understanding between the men whom we used to consider firebrands and the Government, the abolition of such a branch as X. Y. O. is not only advisable, but almost imperative. We don't want to spy upon men with whom we are working in friendship. X. Y. O. is doomed, Miss Brown."

" And won't there be any other work? " she ventured.

He shook his head.

" Not of this sort. Why? Do you want another post? "

" If you are going to undertake any position at all," she replied, " I should like to continue to be your secretary."

He rose to his feet, walked to the window and stood looking out for a moment. There was a gleam of pale sunlight upon the river, fragments of blue sky overhead.

"They have offered me a choice of two posts," he confided, abruptly. "I don't know. I am forty-one years old and I am a little tired."

"You ought to have a rest," she agreed. "Think what you have been through during the last seven months alone."

He nodded but said nothing. Perhaps his thoughts were travelling backwards. There were many thrilling moments of which he had never spoken — that race to Finland with the Russian police after him, the woman spy in Archangel whom he had had to keep in his rooms all night, the hotel in Moscow, the interview at Petrograd with a suspicious official, the search for him in the pretty little Café de Paris at Kieff, where a woman had saved his life, the long wait on the frontier with the soldiers passing his window every few minutes whilst the telegraph wires flashed backwards and forwards message after message. Yes, there were plenty of memories. Perhaps Miss Brown was right. Perhaps he needed a rest.

"Come to-morrow morning as usual," he enjoined presently. "I may have made up my mind by then."

Miss Brown, notwithstanding her five thousand pounds, went home a little sadly. She was very much alone in the world and there was no one to share her good luck. Nevertheless, before she had reached her destination, her brain was already at work wondering whom she could befriend in her new condition of prosperity. Perhaps Frances might be induced to accept some help with the chicken farm, or Paul might let her supply some of the further capital which was needed for the restaurant. She certainly did not require five pounds a week for herself. She was, as she quite well, though very modestly knew, a remarkably good typist and a very capable secretary, and she was always sure of a situation. She felt a little more cheerful as she unlocked her front door and entered the

bed-sitting-room — there to receive a shock. Frances was sitting upon the bed and Paul was occupying the one easy-chair — but somehow a different Frances and a different Paul. She looked from one to the other in amazement.

"Young men are not allowed in here," she told Paul severely.

"I have been here before," he reminded her unabashed. "It was you who let me in."

"The conditions," she began ——

"Oh, shut up!" Frances interrupted. "You tell her, Paul."

Paul, who had risen to his feet, held out the easy-chair for Miss Brown and stood between the two girls. He seemed bigger than ever in the tiny room. The change in his face became more noticeable with every word he spoke.

"Something very fortunate has happened to me," he explained — "not only to me but to all of us. My aunt who was married to an Italian nobleman and who was very rich, died last week, and her will is very generous for us. She offered no assistance whilst she was alive — perhaps because she knew that my father, with whom she had quarrelled, would have refused it — but she has left my father and mother a villa at Cannes and quite enough to live on, and to me she has left two thousand pounds a year."

Miss Brown held out her hands. Good fortune for herself she could accept calmly, but for others — well, the tears of joy swam in her eyes.

"I am so glad, Mr. Paul!" she exclaimed. "You have been so brave."

"I have tried to do what seemed right," he answered simply. "But now you see I am happy for I can marry Frances."

Miss Brown went over and sat by her friend's side

upon the bed. Paul turned away and continued to talk with his back to them.

"It is damned good luck for me," he declared. "Don't be cross with me that I swear a little, Miss Brown. We Russians always do, and I am very happy. And I am going out now to fetch a taxicab because we are all to dine together at the Café Russe."

"And you will wait upon us, won't you, Paul?" Frances called out. "I adore you in that shabby *maître d'hôtel's* dinner suit."

"I will do that certainly," Paul promised. "And I will wear a clean shirt."

CHAPTER XXXVI

It took a matter of three weeks to wind up the affairs of X. Y. O. Then one morning Miss Brown — very lonely these days, for Frances and Paul were married and in the South of France — arrived at the office, punctual as usual, notwithstanding the fact that there was very little to do, to find Dessiter whom she had not seen for several days waiting for her. He nodded in approval as he saw that she was wearing her fur coat.

"Glad you have that on," he remarked. "We have to go down to the country — longish motor ride."

"Something fresh?" Miss Brown asked, with pleasurable anticipation.

"Not altogether fresh," he replied. "It's been hanging on for some time, and it's got to be cleared up. Come along, if you're ready."

They passed out into Whitehall, and a chauffeur who was seated upon the box of a powerful-looking limousine, sprang down and opened the door. Miss Brown breathed a little sigh of content as she felt a rich rug wrapped around her, and sank back amongst the cushions.

"If you're warm enough," Dessiter suggested, "we'll have the car open."

"Quite," she assented. "It will be delightful."

They started off, and Miss Brown, to whom motoring de luxe was an entire novelty, was filled with pleasurable excitement. Soon they passed out of London by Hampstead and Barnet, and found themselves in the country. Already there was green upon the hedges, there were flowers in the cottage gardens, warm sunshine and a soft west wind. Miss Brown talked occasionally but not very

much. She was quite content to sit still and enjoy everything. At Newmarket they swung under an archway and drew up in a courtyard.

"We lunch here," Dessiter told her. "Let's sit on this seat for a minute and they'll give us a cocktail."

They sat outside a bar parlour, and presently, through the window, a barmaid handed them two wine glasses. An elderly head waiter came hurrying from the coffee room, and greeted Dessiter with great respect.

"You are lunching, sir?" he asked anxiously.

"For two," Dessiter assented, holding out his hand. "How are you, Simpkins? Good to see you again."

"It's wonderful to see you alive and well, Colonel, after all the stories we've heard, and seeing it in print and all," the man replied.

"Ah well, you mustn't believe all you see in the papers," Dessiter said, smiling. "I hope you've got a good luncheon, Simpkins. Do your best for us because we're hungry, and if there's any of the Montrachet Chablis left, we'll have a bottle."

The man departed, and soon afterwards Miss Brown for the first time in her life in a public place sat down at table with Dessiter. She was very happy, but a little shy, although that curious air of composure, childlike in its perfect naturalness, still remained with her.

"Hungry, I hope?" her host asked. "Nothing like motoring for giving one an appetite."

"It is wonderful," she assented. "Have we much further to go?"

"A good distance. The roads round here are perfect though. It won't take us long. Quaint old place, this," he went on. "I used to come here racing when I was a lad. All my people were rather keen on it. See that picture of a horse on the wall over the door? That belonged to my father."

"How you must have missed all these things," she remarked sympathetically. "I was born in the country so I know what sport means to a man."

He smiled — one of his curious unanalysable smiles.

"Don't imagine that I have been without it. Sometimes I have been the quarry, sometimes I have been the hunter. You get all the thrill you want when you know that your life's the penalty for a mistake, or when you're watching for that one slip which means death to the other man. Still, one can't go on with those things for ever. It's good to come back to all of this."

He talked much more than usual throughout luncheon, although he avoided a discreet enquiry from his companion as to the nature of the business upon which they were bent. In the car afterwards he closed his eyes as though content to rest. Miss Brown remained alert and happy, fascinated by the country through which they passed, with the smooth motion of the car and the breath of the wind sometimes flavoured a little with the odour of the pine woods, sometimes bringing faint reminders of hyacinths and daffodils from the cottage gardens. Soon they left the great open stretches of heath starred with yellow gorse, and passed into what seemed to be an older world, quainter villages with small, thatched roofed houses, in the gardens of which hollyhocks, and even in the sunny corners early roses, were making a struggling appearance. The region of straight roads was ended. They curled and twisted over fir-clad ridges and into shady hollows where the meadows on each side were rich with green herbage and here and there a wealth of primroses peered out from the moss-grown stone walls, or through the long grass of the weedy ditches. The breath of violets came to them from many places beneath the hedgerows facing southwards, and Miss Brown gave a little sob of delight when on a sheltered slope between two strips of woodland she

saw a waving mist of faint purple, herald of coming bluebells. Dessiter opened his eyes with a smile.

"Fond of the country, Miss Brown?" he asked.

"I was brought up in it," she reminded him. "No one who has ever lived in the real country can forget, and all around London it is so difficult. The suburbs seem to reach for ever."

He nodded understandingly.

"It costs something in beauty," he remarked, "to own the greatest city in the world if one can only travel so far as the buses go. Every season they extend, but so does the curse of villadom."

Presently the villages changed once again in character. The thatch was replaced by ancient red tiles. The faces of the cottages were plastered and encrusted with pebbles, the tangled waste of woodland gave way to scantily growing forests, and into the atmosphere there crept a faint tang of something, drawn far inland from the sea. Miss Brown took a deep breath and sat a little more upright.

"Are we getting near the coast?" she asked, in an awed tone.

"Not far off," he answered.

He too was sitting upright now. They passed at a reduced speed through a village where the stone fronted houses were covered with creepers and where the ivy-grown church with its squat tower seemed to have been standing from time immemorial. A few people standing about gazed at them curiously. Once a hat was hurriedly raised, and once an old man stopped in his leisurely progress and, leaning upon his stick, stood looking after them as one might look at a ghost. Presently the speed of the car was slackened and they came almost to a standstill before some massive iron gates. There was a lodge on each side, a great coat of arms in the middle, gardens ablaze with yellow crocuses. As they slowed down the gates were

opened, and a woman, who had hurried out from one of the lodges, dropped a curtsey. They passed into a park dotted with stately though dwarfed oaks, and with here and there little ringed plantations of fir trees. In the distance were sloping meadows in which cattle were grazing, and beyond, where the land seemed to fall away with a sudden drop, a glint of blue.

"The sea!" Miss Brown cried. "Oh, you didn't tell me that we were so near!"

He smiled down at her with the kindly, amused curiosity of one who is offering a child an unexpected treat. The glint of the sea was blue and the sky above, between the masses of white clouds, was blue, but neither of them were quite so blue as Miss Brown's eyes.

"Well," he remarked, "I thought you'd see it all soon enough."

"But where are we going — here?" she asked, a little nervously. "This is all private."

"We are going to call upon a friend," he confided.

They passed through some inner iron gates, hospitably opened, and came in view of a long, low house with Elizabethan front and Tudor chimneys, a house which seemed to have been built in irregular fashion and added to at various times and in diverse styles, yet through the centuries to have become toned down into one incongruous yet beautiful whole. The broad sweep of gardens in front were ablaze with the flowering shrubs of spring, and in the middle, just in front of the main entrance, there was a great bed of hyacinths, pink and white and blue, almost deliriously fragrant. The car came to a standstill.

"Do we get out?" Miss Brown enquired timidly.

"Of course," he answered. "Since we have come so far my friend will expect to see us."

A manservant was holding the door open, a footman in sombre livery had descended the two steps to take their

wraps from the automobile. Dessiter nodded to both pleasantly. They entered a great circular hall, flagged with white stone which shone like marble and with oak wainscoted walls hung with a long succession of oil paintings. An older servant, in plain clothes, came from the interior, grey-headed but still upright. Dessiter held out his hand.

"Glad to see you, Andrews," he said. "The old place doesn't seem to have changed a bit."

"Nor you, sir," was the somewhat husky response.

"Give us some tea in the library — the small library," Dessiter directed.

They crossed the hall, and proceeded down a broad corridor until they reached a door which was thrown open before them, a door which led into an irregularly shaped room, lofty, with red lacquer walls, very beautifully furnished in the earlier Georgian fashion, and with many vases filled with flowers. There were high French windows, and Miss Brown gave a little stifled cry as below, beyond the limits of the *pleasaunce*, she saw sandy spits and shining estuaries leading out into a long peninsula, and then the breakers, and beyond the sea.

The footman who had followed them threw open the windows and a little breath of its saltness seemed to creep in.

"Tea shall be served immediately, sir," the older servant announced, as he left them.

Miss Brown had lost all her pretty colour; she was, in fact, almost pale.

"You — haven't asked for your friend," she reminded her companion.

"Plenty of time. He'll turn up all right."

"But what a wonderful place!" she gasped, looking out at the gardens, the cedar trees on the lawn, the hedge leading to the walled garden, the ringed meadow, starred

with primroses on one side, the flush of bluebells in the spinney.

"Come out and have a look at it," he invited.

He led her along the flagged stone walk, on each side of which were prim rows of crocuses, up a few steps into a little summer house, set to face seawards. Below them, on the other side of the lower park, was the harbour. It was low tide and most of the fishing boats were lying upon the sand, but the silvery streak of sea was flowing in and already the deeper places were being filled. Here and there one caught glimpses of red roofs from the hidden village, and beyond to the right were strips of marsh land, faintly mauve with wild lavender, yellow patches of glistening sand, and creeks fuller and fuller whilst they watched — and beyond was always the spring sea, soft and gentle and caressing. They stood side by side in the summer house, and Miss Brown's eyes were not quite so blue because there was a mist which came there sometimes on those rare occasions when she had time to indulge in very beautiful thoughts or saw very beautiful things.

"Miss Brown," he said, "we have known each other for quite some time, and I have never heard your Christian name."

"Edith," she murmured.

"Mine is Geoffrey," he said, taking her into his arms.

Then for the first time, Miss Brown was kissed upon the lips.

THE END